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The Seurat Effect

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The Seurat Effect

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The Seurat Effect

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Abstract: Seurat's contemporaries regarded his work as cold and mechanical, in the most pejorative way. Viewers in the late nineteenth century were inclined to chastise him and his impersonal touch and mechanical figures. By the early decades of the next century that view had been almost entirely replaced, and a new understanding of Seurat had blossomed: far from representing the threat of a mechanical world, he came to embody its promise. To these critics, Seurat's technique was perfectly suited to their own era's embrace of technology. Yet, as the modern era has begun to take shape, a third view of the artist has become more common. Although some viewers still regard his work as mechanical or formulaic in respects, an increasing number of scholars and artists reject the idea that his work is cold and mechanical at all. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore why these varying perceptions of Seurat were formed and how each reflects on the time in which it was embraced.

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"A personality, assuredly, but what kind?"

-Octave Maus[1]

Introduction: A Legacy in Question

In the year of Georges Seurat's death, Camille Pissarro wrote: "I think [pointillism] will have great consequences for the future of art. Seurat really added something."[2]

Few critics would disagree with Pissarro, but the "something" means different things to different people. For Marcel Duchamp, it was Seurat's cold and impersonal

[1] Octave Maus, "Les vingtistes parisiens," *L'art moderne* 6, 26 (June 27, 1886), 204. "Une personnalité, assurément, mais de quelle sorte?"

[2] See Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 1 April 1891, in *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 5 vols., ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg (Paris, 1988), 3:54. "…c'est fini le pointillé, mais je pense qu'il se dégagera d'autres conséquences qui seront d'une très grande conséquence plus tard pour l'art. Seurat a apporté évidemment quelque chose."

brush marks that broke ground, liberating art from the saccharine flourishes of vainglorious self-expression. For Meyer Schapiro, Seurat's influence was very different and more intimate, adorning the canvas with an infinite variety of delicate touches that merged in the eye to create ethereal forms. For Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Seurat's contribution was not in his brushwork or his color, but his unique ability to reduce forms and composition to essential shapes, a forerunner of modern abstraction. All great artists compel debate among critics, but Seurat is even more disputable than most; because of his early death and taciturn nature, an aura of mystery and speculation surround him. He left virtually no written records to explain his ideas and theories of his work, and one of the few comments we know of Seurat is, perhaps ironically, "I don't talk much."[3]

This study of Seurat's legacy centers on the rich, varied, and at times contradictory perceptions that have emerged about the artist since his arrival in the late 1800s, and the ways in which those ideas have proven uniquely changeable. Absent a rich personal record or unifying guideposts from the artist himself, the task of understanding Seurat, unlike most of his contemporaries, becomes a special challenge. Not only do multiple interpretations of his work abound, but they are often deeply rooted in the particular time and context of the observer; at certain moments, one view of Seurat enjoys currency, while at other times, an entirely different theory dominates. By examining these diverse understandings of Seurat with an eye toward their historic context, I hope to show that the diverse perceptions of Seurat are a testimony not only to the limited record he left behind, but also — and more vitally — to the intimate effect his work has on viewers, inspiring an intensely personal reaction that reveals as much about the viewers themselves as it does about Seurat.

[3] Seurat in margins of letter to Signac, 26 August 1888, "Je ne parle pourtant pas beaucoup." Printed in Henri Dorra and John Rewald, *Seurat* (Paris, 1959), LXV.

To examine these different interpretations of Seurat, it is helpful to divide his reception into three broad time periods: the initial consensus, between 1886 and 1905; the modern perspective, between 1905 and 1950; and the emerging view between 1950 and today. Looking back at these broad categories, it is clear that each era involves its own debates about Seurat, but within each moment, a certain consensus can be discerned, distinct from the other periods. It is these three consensus views that this thesis hopes to explore in detail.

In the initial consensus, described in the chapter "Impersonal Seurat," Seurat's contemporaries came to regard his work, almost from the moment of its first appearance, as cold and mechanical in the most pejorative way. This early commentary spans from 1886 to 1905, with criticism clustering around several exhibitions. The *8ieme Exhibition de Peinture* (also known as the *Last Impressionist Exhibition*), in the spring of 1886, generated a lot of writing on the artist — some from writers and critics well known then and now, like Joris Karl Huysmans, and others, like Henry Fèvre, less known but equally revealing. It is here, at the Rue Lafitte in Paris, that Seurat first exhibited his *La Grande Jatte*, along with several other paintings and drawings (Fig. 1). In the fall of the same year, Seurat participated at the *Second Exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants* at the Tuileries. After seeing this show, the critic Félix Fénéon coined the term "neo-impressionism" in his review for the periodical *L'art moderne*. Like the *8ieme*, this exhibition also triggered strong reactions. After selling his *Port de Honfleur* to the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren, Seurat was invited to exhibit in Brussels and, in February of 1887, he took part in the venerable exhibition *Les XX* with seven paintings, including *La Grande Jatte*, *Le Bec du Hoc*, *Grandcamp*, and *La Grève du Bas Butin, Honfleur* (Fig. 2 & 3). He would show again with Les XX in 1889 (at their 6th annual exhibition) and 1891 (their 8th). Each of these exhibitions encouraged reactions from Belgian Symbolist

critics, like Octave Maus and Émile Verhaeren. Seurat also exhibited repeatedly with the Société des Artistes Indépendants in 1887 (for its 3rd show); 1888 (4th); 1889 (5th); and 1891 (7th). Interspersed throughout these large and well-known shows, were a number of smaller shows — for example, in 1888 Seurat showed some work, along with Signac and van Gogh, in the Théâtre Librie d'Antoine. His first posthumous exhibitions were in 1892 (a year after his death) at another Les XX exhibition in Brussels and with the Indépendants in Paris. That same year, neo-impressionist Paul Signac also organized the first exhibition of neo-impressionist artists at the Hotel Brébant. And, in 1895, there was a sizable showing of Seurat's work — with twenty-four of his paintings and thirteen drawings — at the Galerie Laffitte. The Symbolist periodical, *La revue blanche* (under the aegis of the anti-establishment critic and publisher Thadée Natanson) held an exhibition of Seurat's works in 1900. And, in 1905 there was a critical retrospective of the artist's work at the Indépendants for their 21st exhibition. Reading the commentary from these exhibitions, it is clear that viewers from the late nineteenth century tended to chastise Seurat for the impersonality of his brushwork and the lifeless figures that froze his canvas. I end this section with the commentary of critic Charles Morice, whose writing on Seurat in 1905 encapsulates the mood of the nineteenth-century audience. Yet it is here that the first period of Seurat's legacy comes to a natural break. By the early decades of the twentieth century, that view had disappeared almost entirely, with a new understanding of Seurat taking its place.

The second period, described in the chapter "Volte Face," runs from 1905 to the mid-1930s and includes the 1908 *Exposition Georges Seurat*, at Bernheim Jeune, in Paris, where many young modern painters like the Cubists were deeply affected by Seurat's works (there was a later *Exposition Georges Seurat* at Bernheim in 1920); Roger Fry's 1910-11 *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, at the Grafton Galleries in London, a

landmark exhibition that introduced the British audience to modern art and cemented the early twentieth-century view that modernism skipped past the Impressionists, from Manet to the Post-Impressionists; and Alfred Barr's 1929 *First Loan Exhibition* at New York's Museum of Modern Art, a show devoted to the Post-Impressionists Seurat, Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh — all painters who, according to Barr, "had come out of the Impressionist blind-alley."[4]

Far from pejorative, critics in this second period used the same terms — "cold" and "mechanical" — to lavish praise upon Seurat as a modern painter, even a man ahead of his time. Using terms like "machine man" as a form of celebration, viewers of this period heralded the same mechanical aspects of Seurat's work that earlier critics had disparaged. To the extent that his brushwork and color choices may have been less expressive than other movements, like the Impressionists or even other Post-Impressionists, these critics considered the choice groundbreaking. As Marcel Duchamp explained, "The greatest scientific spirit of the nineteenth century… is Seurat" and "the only man in the past whom I really respected."[5] To Duchamp, what made Seurat's work most valuable was that it aligned with his own embrace of the impersonal, and of science and technology. Yet over time, this view has also begun to shift. As the modern era has taken shape, another view is becoming more common: although many viewers still regard Seurat as formulaic in certain aspects, lacking the expressive brushwork of popular nineteenth-century favorites like Monet and van Gogh, an increasing number of scholars and artists, from Meyer Schapiro to Bridget Riley, have come to recognize the intricacy

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[4] Alfred Barr, *The Museum of Modern Art First Loan Exhibition*: *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh* (New York, 1929), 12.

[5] Quoted in Anonymous (Henry McBride?), "A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast," *Arts and Decoration* 11 (September, 1915), 427, and in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York, 1968), 24-25.

of Seurat's brushwork as anything but mechanistic. As Chuck Close recently recalled an experience before *La Grande Jatte*:

> I was surprised. It seemed much more capricious and intuitive than I'd thought, especially given the crypto-scientific theories about him we learned in school. I believe Seurat set up his process as a method of operation and then was immediately swept away into an intuitive level.[6]

In this view, explored in the third chapter, "The Personality of the Impersonal," Seurat's work is regarded neither as cold nor mechanical, but deeply intimate, with luminous color, delicate forms, and a variety in touch.

To explore these varying perceptions of Seurat, it is essential to consider how each reflects the time in which it was most prevalent. Just as Seurat's dots segregate color into its purest form, his work overall has a prismatic effect upon the viewer, pulling out the hidden ideas, ideals, and notions of the audience. On its own terms, each of the three consensus views of Seurat is defensible; each in its own way reveals truth. But taken together, these contrasting ideas tell us even more: they reveal the crucial role played by the eye of the beholder, and provide a glimpse into the interactive relationship between an artist and his audience. The fact that Seurat's work can have such a potent and diverse effect over more than a century is the truest measure of his power as a painter. He becomes a Rorschach test for each observer. The intent of this dissertation is to examine what that Rorschach test reveals about Seurat.

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[6] Chuck Close in Patrick Pacheco, "Point Counterpoint," *Art and Antiques* 8 (October, 1991), 73.

Chapter One: Impersonal Seurat

THE MECHANICAL MAN

In the early spring of 1886, a crowd gathered on the streets of Paris for the *Eighth Independent Exhibition*, hosted by the famous restaurant Maison Dorée (Fig. 4).[7] Among the throngs were some of the most celebrated critics in the European art world, including Joris Karl Huysmans, Gustave Geffroy, and Paul Adam; inside, they were about to experience some of the finest paintings of their era — or, for that matter, any. There would be a series of seven pastels by Degas, in which the artist presented the nude in a radical new way, turning the viewer into a voyeur that he described as looking "through a

[7] The exhibition took place from May 15 until June 15th. Originally the name of the show was *Eighth Impressionist Exhibition* but since so many of the Impressionists refused to participate — in part because of Seurat's presence – Degas suggested the alternative name *Eighth Independent Exhibition*. The Impressionists who abnegated were: Renoir, Monet, Sisley, and Caillebotte. Camille Pissarro later recounted how Eugène Manet, brother of the painter and one of the principal organizers of the exhibit, snubbed Seurat : "I explained to M. Manet, who probably didn't understand anything I said, that Seurat brings a new element which these gentlemen are unable to appreciate, despite all their talent, that I am personally convinced of the progressive character of this art that in time will yield extraordinary results …" "…j'ai expliqué à M.Manet, qui n'a dû rien y comprendre, que Seurat apportait un élément nouveau que ces messieurs ne pouvaient apprécier malgré tout leur talent, que moi, personnellement, je suis persuadé du progrès qu'il y a dans cet art qui donnera, à un moment donné, des résultats extraordinaires…" Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 8 May 1886, in *Correspondance*, 2:45. Among the artists who *did* participate were: Lucien and Camille Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, Degas, Gauguin, Guillaumin, Morisot, Schuffenecker, Bracquemond, Cassatt, Forain, Rouart, Tillot, Vignon, Redon, and Zandomeneghi.

keyhole."[8] Visitors would see Camille Pissarro's first neo-impressionist works, among them his now-famous *Apple Pickers* (1886), which have come to be regarded as his response to an identity crisis within the impressionist movement (Fig. 5).[9] They would see Gauguin's iconic paintings of Normandy, Rouen, Brittany, and Denmark. And many of them would, for the first time, experience the work of Georges Seurat.[10] Although a number of other works on display that day, especially Degas' provocative pastels, would stir up heated discussion, it was Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* that surged into the limelight, acquiring instant fame and notoriety (Fig. 1). Even before the show opened, rumors were circulating about a startling new kind of painting. Amid the excitement and commotion, many of these rumors verged on the outlandish: the Irish author and critic George Moore would later recall hearing that the work had been painted with only three colors, and that the monkey in the picture had a tail three meters long.[11] The neo-impressionist Paul Signac remembered that, on the day of the opening, the painter Alfred Stevens "continually shuttled back and forth between the Maison Dorée and the neighboring Café Tortoni recruiting his band to look at Seurat's canvas so as to show how his friend Degas had fallen to such a degree of abjection by welcoming such horrors. He threw his money on the turnstile and did not even wait for change, in such a hurry was he to bring in his forces."[12] Another painter, Théo van Rysselberghe, later to become a Neo-Impressionist

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[8] Degas to George Moore in George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (New York, 1891), 318.

[9] After being attacked by critics for their overly spontaneous technique and lack of seriousness, the Impressionists set out to structure their work, each in his own way: Monet delved into his series paintings, began spending more time in the studio, and worked on a larger format; Renoir traveled to Italy, in search of order, and entered his "classical" stage; Pissarro experimented with neo-impressionism.

[10] Although little known, Seurat did already have an exhibtion history: he showed his drawing *Aman-Jean* at the 1883 Salon; his painting *Une baignade, Asnières* of 1883-1884 with the Artistes Indépendants in 1884; a study for *La Grande Jatte*, nine croquetons, and the portrait of Aman-Jean in 1885, with the Indépendants; and a preparatory painting of *La Grande Jatte*, some croquetons, and *Une baignade*.in New York at the American Art Galleries, in April of 1886.

[11] George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (New York, 1920), 43-44.

[12] Paul Signac, "Le néo-impressionnisme, documents," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 11, 76 (January, 1934), 55. "Le jour de l'ouverture, l'illustre Alfred Stevens ne cessa pas de faire la navette entre la Maison Dorée et le

himself, was so enraged with *La Grande Jatte* that he broke his cane in front of it. Octave Maus, the Belgian lawyer, publisher, and entrepreneur (founder of both *L'art moderne* and the independent group of Belgian artists, Les XX) joked that the painting would cause "sudden cases of mental breakdown and overwhelming apoplectic seizures."[13] And the painting purportedly sent at least a few viewers into fits of "boisterous laughter."[14]

Almost immediately, a few broad themes emerged. Foremost was the axiom that Seurat's work was cold and aloof. As the publisher Thadée Natanson reported hearing astonished viewers exclaim at a neo-impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1894 (just eight years after Seurat exhibited *La Grande Jatte* for the first time): "Is it done by machine?"[15] To Seurat's critics, this coolness made the work inaccessible; both Renoir and Gauguin openly deplored the "impersonality" of Seurat's paintings, with Renoir disparaging Seurat's method of working with "little points" as "incomprehensible" and Gauguin saying that Seurat was nothing more than a "little young chemist who piled up tiny dots."[16] At the same time, critics overwhelmingly dismissed Seurat's depictions of the human form, calling them "hieratic," "wooden," and "Egyptian," to characterize their stiffness and awkwardness. They assailed his compositions as premeditated, unnatural,

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voisin Tortoni, recrutant ceux de sa bande qui sirotaient autour du célèbre personne, et les conduisant devant le Seurat, pour leur montrer à quel degré d'abjection était tombé son ami Degas, en hospitalisant de telles horreurs. Il jetait de l'or sur le tourniquet, n'attendant pas sa monnaie, dans la hâte d'amener de nouvelles fournées."

[13] O. Maus, "Les vingtistes parisiens," 204. "A Bruxelles, la *Grande-Jatte* ferait scandale. Il y aurait, si elle était exposée, des cas subits d'aliénation mentale et des apoplexies foudroyantes."

[14] George Moore, *Confessions*, 44.

[15] Thadée Natanson, "Expositions," *La revue blanche* 6 (1894), 187. "On peut cependant noter cette fois l'attitude moins émerveillée qu'étonnée du public. Comme l'entrée du magasin est libre, il n'est pas rare d'entendre passant, après quelques instants de minutieuse contemplation, demander: 'C'est à la mécanique?' et s'incliner respectueusement à la réponse: 'Non, Monsieur, c'est à la main.'"

[16] Renoir to Ambroise Vollard in *Ambroise Vollard: En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir* (Paris, 1938), 211. "…on vous prévenait dès l'entrée que pour comprendre ce que représentait la toile, encore fallait-il se mettre à une distance de deux mètres cinquante. Et moi qui aime tourner autour d'un tableau le prendre en main!" Gauguin to his wife, 1892 March, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, ed. Maurice Malingue (Paris, 1946), 221. "…des petits jeunes gens chimistes qui accumulent des petits points."

and too "abstract" or intellectual. Even his treatment of color, the aspect of art most strongly equated with emotion, was seen as inorganic and rigid. In a short time, Seurat's artistic persona had been cast: a sterile and cold scientist, indifferently assigning stiff figures with the lifeless touch of a machine.

While the Impressionists had sometimes been chided by critics for being too spontaneous and unrefined, Seurat had ostensibly gone too far in the other direction.[17] Commentators suggested that his response to impressionism, his *neo-impressionism*, swung too far toward the rational.[18] He may have resisted the impulsive tendencies of the Impressionists, carefully thinking about and planning his work, even "correcting" what many critics, like Émile Zola and Huysmans, attacked as the impetuosity and disorderliness of impressionism, but in the process he had stripped his works of the one thing that mattered most, the thing Impressionists undoubtedly got right: emotion.[19]

In time, this perception of Seurat's work would begin to bleed into his reputation as a man; critics began to describe the artist's speech, mannerisms, and appearance with the same derisive vocabulary they applied to his painting. French Symbolist poet and art critic Gustave Kahn, who actually liked Seurat, nevertheless described him as a man with

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[17] Some of the main critics of impressionism's lack of finish were Louis Leroy, Jules-Antoine Castagnary, Émile Zola, Albert Wolff, and Joris-Karl Huysmans (who would eventually change tune to support the Impressionists). See Steven Z. Levine, *Monet and his critics* (New York – London, 1976) for a lengthy discussion of these critics.

[18] Seurat preferred the term "chromo-luminarisme" to describe his technique. See Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* (Paris, 1911; originally published in 1899), 62.

[19] It is important to note that while today the Impressionists are automatically linked to emotion and feeling, in the nineteenth century this connection was debated. For example, there were critics like Félix Fénéon, who felt that the Impressionists worked mechanically – he even compared them to cameras – simply copying what was in front of their eyes, without any kind of interpretation or emotion. Contrasting the work of Seurat to that of artists like the Impressionists, Fénéon wrote: "Among the crowd of artists who mechanically copy the exterior world, they [the neo-impressionists] impose…the very sensation of life: for them objective reality is simply a theme for the creation of a higher, sublimated reality transfused with their personality." See F. Fénéon, "Le néo-impressionnisme," *L'art moderne* 7 (May 1, 1887), in *Félix Fénéon: Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1970), 1:74. "Parmi la cohue des machinaux copistes des extériorités, ils imposent, ces quatre ou cinq artistes, la sensation même de la vie: c'est réalité supérieure et sublimée où leur personnalité se transfuse."

"a somewhat cold exterior appearance," explaining, "the biography of Georges Seurat is flat, devoid of picturesque facts."[20] Because of Seurat's tidy look and ordinary dress, Degas called him "the notary," insinuating that the artist, and by extension his work, was equally bland and unimaginative, lacking the eccentric aura of a true artist.[21] The Belgian poet and critic Émile Verhaeren described Seurat's movement as "circumscribed" and his voice as "slow and uniform," one that sought out "preceptorial words," adding that, "despite the directional movement of his expansive [lines], a certain coldness appears, attributable more to the artist's temperament than to his system."[22] It was Seurat's frigid soul, not merely his method, that circumscribed his work.[23] Fellow Neo-Impressionist Henri-Edmond Cross concluded a few years later, after Seurat's premature death: "Seurat was calm and…modest. He was an obstinate and severe worker," effectively distancing him from artistic originality and individuality.[24] Another Neo-Impressionist, Charles Angrand, agreed, saying that the artist "was serious without ever abandoning himself to fantasy…" and he "wasn't a slave to nature… but he was respectful of it, not being

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[20] Gustave Kahn, "Seurat," *L'art moderne* 11, 14 (April 5, 1891), 107. "Sous un aspect un peu froid….La biographie de Georges Seurat est plane et dépourvue de faits pittoresques."

[21] Gustave Kahn, "Au temps du pointillisme," *Mercure de France* 171 (April 1 – May 1, 1924), 13. "Degas appelait Seurat le notaire."

[22] Émile Verhaeren, "Georges Seurat," *La société nouvelle* 7, 1 (1891), 434. "Calmement, avec des gestes circonscrits…sa lente et uniforme voix cherchant des mots légèrement préceptoraux." É. Verhaeren, "Chronique artistique: Les XX," *La société nouvelle* 7 (1891), 249. "D'où, malgré toutes les directions des *expansives* une certaine froideur, qu'il faut beaucoup plus attribuer au tempérament de l'artiste qu'à son système. Celui-ci est incontestable."

[23] Later, Lucie Cousturier claimed that Seurat's physiognomy mirrored that of his paintings: "The physical appearance of Seurat was what one would have anticipated from seeing the finely shaped, rigid, calm figures he created….No sudden movements shook his comely head set squarely on his shoulders, and no troubled expression disturbed his firm, regular features…" Lucie Cousturier, *Seurat* (Paris, 1921), 8. "L'apparence physique de Seurat était semblable à l'idée qu'on se ferait du peintre d'après les figures élancées, raides et calmes qu'il a créées. C'est dans une attitude rigide, où se durcissaient ses formes hautes et pleines, qu'il équilibrait les ardentes poussées de son âme. Nuls déplacements inquiets n'agitaient sa tête harmonieuse et droite sur son buste, ni aucune expression de trouble, ses traits immobiles et réguliers, encadrés de brun."

[24] Henri-Edmond Cross to Gustave Coquiot in *Seurat* (Paris, 1924), 48. "Seurat était calme et doux, courtois et modeste. C'était un travailleur obstiné, austère."

imaginative."[25] For Angrand, the rigidity of Seurat's mind prevented him from explorative meandering and journeys of discovery in his work.[26] Van Gogh's brother, Théo, was even more harsh, calling Seurat's work "not very generous from the standpoint of ideas."[27] And impressionist Camille Pissarro called him "colder, more logical, and more moderate" than any of his fellow Neo-Impressionists.[28] Critic Albert Arnay described Seurat's mind as "predestined" — lacking the unpredictable variations that come with a spontaneous approach — and painter/writer Maurice Denis suggested that the artist's "abstract and philosophical mind" resulted in his work's obvious "coldness."[29] Yet another critic, Julien Leclercq, commented, "more than an artist, Seurat was an intelligent researcher."[30] "His mind was not that entirely of a born painter," Gustave Kahn explained, "He had a mathematical and philosophic mind, fit to conceive art in some form other than painting…"[31]

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[25] Charles Angrand to G. Coquiot in *Seurat*, 42, 40. "Cependant il n'était pas esclave de la nature, oh! non; mais il en était respectueux, n'étant pas imaginative….Il était grave sans jamais un abandon vers la fantaisie…"

[26] Angrand's view of Seurat, as an artist who simply followed nature, was not typical, especially in the early twentieth century when critics and artists viewed Seurat as a great abstracter whose genius was his construction of purely formal paintings. Both views, of Seurat as servile copier, and Seurat as formal constructer, support the notion that his approach was impersonal.

[27] Théo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh, 19 March 1890, in *Lettres à son frère Vincent* (Amsterdam, 1932), 97. (Letter 29). "Certes il exprime du mouvement, mais cela a un aspect bien curieux et pas très généreux comme idées."

[28] Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 15 May 1887, in *Correspondance*, 2:167 "…Seurat, qui est plus froid, plus logique, plus modéré…"

[29] Albert Arnay, "Chronique artistique: l'annuel des XX," *Florèal* 1 (March, 1892), 84. "Pauvre cher grand mort, fauché avant d'avoir pu réaliser ce qu'il sentait palpiter là – dans le mystère de son cerveau prédestiné." Maurice Denis, "La réaction nationaliste," *Théories* 1890-1910 (Paris, 1920), 196. "Chez lui pas d'abandon, et souvent de la froideur. C'est un résultat de l'abstraction et de l'esprit philosophique."

[30] Julien Leclercq, "Aux Indépendants," *Mercure de France* (May, 1890), 175. "En somme, Seurat est un chercheur plus intelligent qu'artiste."

[31] G. Kahn, "Seurat," 108. "Son esprit n'était pas absolument celui du peintre né…il avait une cervelle mathématique et philosophique, très propre à concevoir l'art sous une autre forme que la peinture…"

Cold. Severe. Abstract. Notary. Logical. Worker. Uniform. Mathematical. The words build a consistent picture — of an aloof man, blandly ascribing paint to his canvas, dot by incessant dot.

Unfortunately for Seurat, there are few of his own comments or writings to contradict this view. In 1894 Signac lamented that in the wake of Seurat's death, all that remained was "oblivion, silence."[32] Indeed, the scant historical evidence we have can seem to reinforce the image of him as a sterile notary. Here was a man whose partner, Madeleine Knoblock, and child were unknown even to those closest to him (including Signac, Pissarro, and Verhaeren) until after the artist's death to malignant diphtheria in 1891, at the age of 31. His most famous statement, "I don't talk much," has frequently been presented as evidence of his remote disposition, and a firsthand sign of emotional detachment.[33] Of course, this has always required some stretch of the meaning — after all, not talking is different from not feeling — but for decades, critics have assailed Seurat with the quote, presenting it as proof positive that he was cold as a man and painter.

The caricature is difficult to refute with so little else known of Seurat's mind. Just a handful of other remarks, scattered letters, and comments remain, most attributed to him by others. These often serve to reinforce the perception: his alleged statement to Charles Angrand, "Some see poetry in what I do. No, I apply my method and that is all," seems a powerful indictment, strongly suggesting the image of a workman who applies his brushmarks upon the canvas like bricks.[34] Is it possible that, a century later, and with

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[32] Paul Signac, journal entry 15 September 1894, in John Rewald, "Extraits du Journal Inédit de Paul Signac, 1894-1895, *Gazette des beaux-arts* (July–September, 1949), 104. "- et pour Seurat…l'oubli, le silence."

[33] Seurat to Signac, 26 August 1886, "Je ne parle pourtant pas beaucoup." Printed in H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, LXV.

[34] Seurat recalled by Charles Angrand and told to Gustave Coquoit in *Seurat* (Paris, 1924), 41. "Ils – c'étaient les littérateurs et critiques – ils voient de la poésie dans ce que je fais. Non, j'applique ma méthode

only the faintest primary evidence, we may discover that Seurat's work — indeed, his personality — was just the opposite of what his contemporaries believed?

From the outset, criticism of Seurat focused on three principle aspects of his approach: his mark making, his representation of human form, and his composition of elements on the canvas.

First have always been the marks, which strike many viewers as redundant and rote. Even some early critics who liked Seurat's dots, such as the young Symbolist critic Félix Fénéon, often used a loaded vocabulary to describe them. After the first appearance of *La Grande Jatte* in May of 1886, Fénéon described Seurat's brushwork as "monotonous," meaning the description as a compliment:

> Each part of his immense painting, *La Grande-Jatte*, demonstrates the monotonous and patient spots, a tapestry: here, in effect, touch is useless, it is impossible to cheat; no place for moments of bravura; that the hand is numb but the eye is agile, perspicacious and wise — on an ostrich, a bale of straw, a wave or a rock the movement of the brush remains the same.[35]

Fénéon was unusual for his time, in that he marveled at Seurat's consistent and unvaried technique, with no single space of the canvas given priority over another. He likened this effect to a woven "tapestry," the stitches tight, controlled, and uninflected, like a denial or rejection of paint itself, of its pliability and personality.

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et c'est tout." In 1890, Seurat outlined his theories in an unsent letter to the journalist Maurice Beaubourg. In his "Esthetique" – the theoretical part of the letter – Seurat says that he is a follower of Chevreul and Rood, two prominent scientists, enforcing the notion that above all else he is seriously committed to science as the source for his art. There are four drafts of the letter. For facsimiles see Robert L. Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat* (New York, 1991), Appendix E, 381-382.

[35] Félix Fénéon, "VIIIe exposition impressionniste," *La vogue* 1 (June 13, 1886), in *Félix Fénéon: Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1970), 1:36. "Son immense tableau, la *Grande-Jatte*, en quelque partie qu'on examine, s'étale, monotone et patiente tavelure, tapisserie: ici, en effet, la patte est inutile, le truquage impossible; nulle place pour les morceaux de bravoure; – que la main soit gourde, mais que l'œil soit agile, perspicace et savant; sur une autruche, une botte de paille, une vague ou un roc la manœuvre du pinceau reste la même."

Yet most other contemporary critics used the same analogy to describe Seurat without Fénéon's enthusiasm. Reporting for *L'art moderne*, Octave Maus dismissed Seurat's "small brushstrokes of equal dimension, [which look like] miniscule woolen threads, one would think embroidered on canvas, or woven like a tapestry with a vertical warp."[36] At the Société des Artistes Indépendants in the fall of 1886, the positivist literary and art critic Émile Hennequin concluded that Seurat's mimicry of tapestry, conscious or not, was an insult to painting:

> when [Seurat] attacks the problem of sunlight, as he does in *La Grande Jatte*, he fails miserably, not only because of the absence of light, but also because of the absence of life in the figures, whose contours are painstakingly filled in with colored dots as in a tapestry. They are painted Gobelins, just as unpleasant as the originals.[37]

Like the tapestries produced at the Gobelins factory in Paris, Hennequin found Seurat's figures stiff, "like badly made mannequins," and his technique of painting with colored points overwrought.[38] Ultimately, he felt that Seurat's technique was unable to convey the variety and movement essential to life. "The pictures of M. Seurat… are almost entirely devoid of luminosity… as for his *Grande Jatt*e… one can hardly imagine anything dustier or more lusterless…. the technique more or less contributes little to art… to their capacity to move."[39] And after seeing Seurat's work at Rue Lafitte in 1886, the

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[36] O. Maus, "Les vingtistes parisiens," 204. "Peinte d'un bout à l'autre à petits coups de pinceaux d'égale dimension, sorte de pointillé minuscule, on la croirait brodée sur canvas au moyen de laines de couleurs, ou tissée ainsi qu'une toile de haute-lice."

[37] Émile Hennequin, "Notes d'art: exposition des artistes indépendants," *La vie moderne* 8 (September 11, 1886), 581-582. « Mais s'il s'attaque comme dans la *Grande-Jatte* au plein soleil et à la figure mourante, son insuccès éclate, non seulement par l'absence de lumière, mais par l'absence encore de vie dans ces figures dont le tracé a été péniblement colorié au point comme une tapisserie. Ce sont des Gobelins peints, aussi déplaisants que les vrais."

[38] É. Hennequin, "Notes d'art: les impressionnistes," *La vie moderne* 8 (June 19, 1886), 390. "…nous ne pouvons goûter son *Dimanche à la Grande-Jatte*, qui est *cru* de ton et où les personnages sont dessinés à jour comme des mannequins mal fabriqués."

[39] É. Hennequin, "Notes," 581-582. "…les tableaux de M. Seurat…manquent au plus haut degré de lumière…quant à son tableau la *Grande-Jatte*…on ne peut rien imaginer de plus poussiéreux ni de plus

socialist critic Henry Fèvre lamented that Seurat's uniform marks, like the threads of tapestry — "those trees, those leaves, it's all made out of wool" — destroyed the picturesque variety of surface that he, and so many others, considered the hallmark of good painting.[40]

These critics would prove so blinded by their focus on the dots, and what they regarded as inexpressive brushwork, that they were incapable of understanding why a painter might choose such a meticulous method; how the subtlety and nuance may be the essence of the work. It was one thing, they believed, for a medium long considered inferior, like tapestry, to imitate painting; quite another for the great and celebrated medium of painting to bear any resemblance to tapestry.[41]

Did Seurat *consciously* imitate tapestry, seeking an impersonal patina for his work? His paintings clearly adopted some of the limits of that medium, restricting his marks to a certain size and limiting the extent of his paint's materiality. For Maus, Fèvre, Huysmans, and Hennequin, it was this restriction that defined Seurat; a painter's physical interaction with paint, they felt, was the defining element of his work and determined his expressive potential. For them, the analogy to tapestry was salient, not because it was literally indistinguishable from weaving, or might be confused for it, but because the work reflected a similar detachment, the "numb" hand unable to vary the character of the

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terne.…on ne saurait trop insister sur ce qu'un procédé de plus ou de moins apporte peu de chose à l'art même, à la beauté des œuvres, c'est-à-dire à leur capacité d'émouvoir."

[40] Henry Fèvre, "L'exposition des impressionnistes," *Revue de demain* (1886), 149. ""…et ces arbres, ces feuillages, c'est de la laine…" The Impressionists, too, were attacked for lack of variation in handling.

[41] As Jeroen Stumpel points out, the conception of European tapestry in the nineteenth century was defined by its rivalry with painting. In order to excel at their craft, weavers felt compelled to imitate painterly qualities like illusion. One of the reasons that enthusiasm for tapestry waned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was because it was unable to compete with painting: no matter how hard it tried tapestry would always fall short. It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century, when weavers decided to abandon their quest to imitate painting by seeking out the decorative qualities inherent in their medium – i.e. flatness and stylization – that enthusiasm for tapestries grew (a fact reflected in soaring prices). See Jeroen Stumpel, "The Grande Jatte, that patient tapestry," *Simiolus* (1984): 209-24.

stitch. Although tapestries are handmade, they seem incapable of reflecting an artist's personal touch.[42] As the nineteenth-century Academician Charles Blanc described in his 1882 treatise on decorative art, *Grammaire des arts decoratifs*:

> the very texture of the tapestry, created according to the method of horizontal or vertical warp, resists the perfect imitation of a painting made with a free and flexible brush and with a flowing use of color. It is a happy fact that the striped surface of the fabric and the filamentary shapes of the colors force the weaver to use only straightforward hues, the harmonies and contrasts of which strike the eye of the viewer only from that distance at which the stitching of the fabric are no longer visible.[43]

For these critics, then, Seurat had degraded the painter by imitating tapestry and renouncing the "free and flexible brush," rejecting the "flowing" of colors mixed on canvas. In their place, he produced a plodding and systematic art born from a neatly ordered and tedious palette that resembled nothing so much as the "chords of the fabric," blurring in sheer number.

The notion of those dots merging at a distance would come to occupy an important role to Seurat's critics during his lifetime. For many, Seurat's work was most distressing and offensive when viewed at close range. Seurat's close friend Émile Verhaeren described the relief he felt when viewing *La Grande Jatte*, during the Brussels XX exhibition in 1891, from further away:

> Perhaps for the first time, it was possible to examine the painting at the requisite distance, where the fusion of the pure pigments takes place in the eye. In Paris,

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[42] The artist's "touch" is revealed in other ways though: sense of design, composition, color choice, etc.

[43] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts décoratifs*: *décoration intérieure de la maison* (Paris, 1882), 95. "Oui, il est heureux que la contexture même de la tapisserie fabriquée au métier de haute ou de basse lisse, s'oppose à l'imitation parfaite d'une peinture traitée d'un pinceau libre et souple, avec une couleur fluide. Il est heureux que la surface striée du tissage, que la forme filamenteuse des couleurs, forcent le tapissier à n'employer que des teintes franches dont les harmonies et les contrastes ne puissent frapper l'œil de spectateur qu'à une distance où les rudentures du tissu cesseront d'être visibles."

> the too-narrow dimensions of the room had not permitted this. And the technique assailed the spectator.[44]

For Verhaeren, it was only from this "requisite distance" that Seurat's marks, which had been troublesome and assaultive at close range, could be wiped away and ignored, protecting the viewer from an otherwise unappealing work. Verhaeren was not alone in this inclination. In 1887, Marcel Fouquier explained that the paintings of Seurat and Signac at the *3rd Exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants* had "a very pretty effect, provided that one views them from a suitable distance, and with the obligatory blinking eyes."[45] While the critic Jean Ajalbert would learn to appreciate Seurat's technique at close range, he admitted that, at first glance, he found the new approach "fatiguing."[46] Even those artists and critics who found some virtue in Seurat's technique, like Fénéon, were still drawn to the idea that there was an ideal viewing distance — and not too close. "Step back a bit," Fénéon wrote, "and all these varicolored spots melt into undulating, luminous masses; brushwork, one might say, vanishes: the eye solicited only by that which is essential to painting."[47] Distance was essential, he believed; Seurat's work could not be fully admired at short range. The natural desire to examine a canvas' surface, to view the character of the painter's brush, had to be preemptively counter-acted with a step back. Many of Seurat's fellow Neo-Impressionists would, in time, embrace

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[44] É. Verhaeren, "Georges Seurat," 431. "Pour la première fois peut-être, était-il donné d'examiner l'œuvre à la distance voulue, là, d'où la fusion des pigments purs peut se faire dans l'œil. A Paris, la trop étroite dimension de la salle ne le permettait pas. Et le procédé gênait le spectateur."

[45] Marcel Fouquier, "L'exposition des artistes indépendants," *Le XIXe siècle* 18 (March 28, 1887), 2. "MM. Seurat et Signac ont là une vingtaine de toiles dans leur manière connue, mais dont quelques-unes sont d'un très jolie effet, pourvu qu'on les contemple à la distance convenable et avec le clignement d'yeux obligatoire."

[46] Jean Ajalbert, "Le salon des impressionnistes," *Revue moderne* 3 (June 20, 1886), 392. "La première impression de surprise passée, la raide exagérée des personnages s'amollit; les pointillés fatiguent moins et l'averse des rayons pleut à travers les feuillages…"

[47] Félix Fénéon, "Le néo-impressionnisme," in *Œuvres,* 1:74. "…un recul de deux pas, – et toutes ces versicolores gouttes se fondent en ondulantes masses lumineuses; la facture, on peut dire, s'évanouit: l'œil n'est plus sollicité que par ce qui est essentiellement la peinture."

this notion as well. Camille Pissarro, who experimented with pointillism from 1886 to 1890, triumphantly reported in an 1887 letter to his son that the artist Bracquemond, viewing his work from a distance, had missed the dots entirely. "He did not even notice from where we were sitting, that they are pointillist works," Pissarro bragged.[48] In another letter, to his dealer Durand-Ruel, Pissarro explained that the character of neo-impressionist works resided in a place beyond brushwork: "As for the skill of execution, we [Neo-Impressionists] consider it pointless, it is anyway of minor significance: art having nothing to do with it, in our opinion, for us, originality only consists in the character of the composition and the particular vision of each artist."[49] For neo-impressionist Paul Signac, proselytizer of the group, stepping back was essential, a move that ideally preceded and even precluded coming close. In his 1899 treatise/defense of neo-impressionism, *D'Eugene Delacroix au néo-impressionisme,* Signac wrote: "At the [right] distance… the technique of the Neo-Impressionists will not be shocking… the touches disappear and all that the eye will perceive will be the charms of light and

[48] See Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 15 May 1887, in *Correspondance*, 2:166. "…il ne s'apercevait même pas, de l'endroit où nous étions assis, que c'était fait au pointillé."

[49] Pissarro to Durand Ruel, 6 November 1886, in *Correspondance*, 2:75. "Quant à l'exécution, nous la regardons comme nulle, ce n'est du reste que peu important l'art n'ayant rien à y voir, selon nous, la seule originalité consistant dans le caractère du dessin et la vision particulière à chaque artiste." Some people who objected to Pissarro's foray into neo-impressionism: Durand-Ruel, "Durand prefers the old execution…in short, he isn't very keen." "Durand aime mieux l'ancienne exécution…Bref…in n'y comprend pas grand chose…" 30 July 1886, 2:64; Monet, "Monet pities me because of the course I have taken"… "…Monet me plagnait beaucoup de suivre cette voie" 10 January 1887, 2:101; Murer "takes the view that I am lost…", and "you know perfectly well that the point is impossible" "Murer, parâit-il, est d'avis que je suis perdu." 28 August 1887, 2: 198 and "…mais vous saviez bien que c'était impossible de point." 20 September 1887, 2:200; De Bellio "is also of the opinion that I am either lost already or falling behind, and that I am making a great mistake in trying to develop my art." "De Bellio de son côte a aussi constaté que je suis perdu ou en baisse, que je m'étais fait un tort considérable en voulant faire un pas de progrès," 28 August, 1887, 2:198; Renoir: "You have abandoned the dot but won't admit that you were wrong; "Vous avez abandonné le point, vous ne voulez pas avouer que vous vous êtes trompé!'" 20 September 1887, 2:200; even Pissarro's wife preferred his old method: "Your mother wanted me to do a painting for her, but, as ever, not in the new manner." "Ta mère a bien voulu que je lui fasse un tableau, mais comme toujours, pas la nouvelle manière…" 26 April 1888, 2: 224.

harmony that they procure." [50] The function of the dots was like a sleight of hand. Too much scrutiny unraveled the trick.[51] While he recognized the urge to examine paintings up close, Signac cautioned, using a phrase from Rembrandt, "a painting is not to be sniffed."[52] Stepping back tamed the shock, and anyway, he insisted, the mark itself was only a "procedure":

> *Pointiller* (dotting) is the mode of expression chosen by the painter who places color on canvas in *petits points* (small dots)…. It is to cover a surface closely with little multicolored touches, pure or dull, striving to reproduce, by optical mixing of these multiple elements, the varied hues of nature….The point (dot) is only a brushstroke, a procedure, and like all procedures, of minor importance.[53]

Signac explained that while the "dexterous" display of the brush was intrinsic to the Impressionist, an inevitable result of the hand's need to keep up with changing impressions, neo-impressionism was a technique in which "the skill of the hand ha[d] no importance."[54] Seeking to elucidate Seurat's theory shortly after the emergence of neo-impressionism, Fénéon explained that the optical mixture of neo-impressionism, in which color merged in the eye of the viewer, was not achieved "through wild slashes of the brush" but through the application of "tiny points" of color.[55] These points or dots "in isolation from each other on the canvas, recombine on the retina. One has, therefore, not

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[50] P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix,* 87. "À la distance que supposent les dimensions habituelles des œuvres de ce genre, la facture, convenablement appropriée, disparaîtra et les éléments séparés se reconstitueront en lumières colorées éclatantes."

[51] De Bellio called Pissarro a "magician." See Pissarro to Lucien, 8 May 1887, in *Correspondance*, 2:162. "… il m'a dit que j'étais sorcier…"

[52] P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix*, 88. "'La peinture ne doit pas être flairée,' a dit Rembrandt."

[53] P. Signac, ibid., 82-83. "*Pointiller*, est le mode d'expression choisi par le peintre qui pose de la couleur sur une toile par petits points plutôt que de l'étaler à plat. C'est couvrir une surface de petites touches multicolores rapprochées, pures ou ternes, en s'efforçant d'imiter, par le mélange optique de ces éléments multipliés, les teintes variées de la nature…Le *point* n'est qu'un coup de brosse, un procédé, et, comme tous les procédés, n'importe guère."

[54] P. Signac, ibid., 99. "Et ceci, qui n'est par pour faire regretter aux néo-impressionnistes d'avoir adopté une facture dans laquelle l'habilité de main n'à aucune importance…"

[55] F. Fénéon, "VIIIe exposition impressionniste," in *Œuvres,*1:36. "la *belle facture* sabrée et torchonée" and "la *peinture au point*."

a mixture of colored matter but a mixture of colored light."[56] And later: "This spottting of the canvas requires no special manual dexterity, only vision."[57] A good neo-impressionist painting, as pure optical sensation, made the viewer forget about paint and its handling. No "wild dashes," just "tiny points."[58]

It was precisely this lack of materiality and differentiation — the "tiny points of color" — that many viewers found so mechanical and ill-suited to the natural world.[59] The critic Arsène Alexandre objected: "Each object in nature, each material, has its own particular texture, that cannot be rendered by a uniform procedure."[60] As the movement began taking shape in the late 1880s, even the term "pointillist" took on a loaded meaning. Far from the even-handed implication it holds today, describing this method of painting, in Seurat's time the term was distinctly pejorative. In French, the word "*point*" means "stitch" and the association of Seurat's painting with weaving, as described above, was inherently dismissive. From the first introduction of the term "pointillist" in 1886, it was used deliberately to disparage Seurat's technique. Seurat himself disliked the term, preferring the more clumsy "chromo-luminariste," which emphasized his interest in color

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[56] F. Fénéon, "VIIIe exposition impressionniste," *Œuvres,* 1:36. "Ces couleurs, isolées sur la toile, se recomposent sur la rétine: on a donc non un mélange de couleurs-lumières (pigments), mais un mélange de couleurs-lumières."

[57] F. Fénéon, "Le néo-impressionnisme," in *Œuvres*, 1:73."Cette maculature de la toile ne suppose aucune adresse manuelle, mais seulement – oh! seulement – une vision artiste et exercée."

[58] F. Fénéon, "VIIIe exposition impressionniste," in *Œuvres,*1:36. "la *belle facture* sabrée et torchonée" and 'la *peinture au point*.' »

[59] Fénéon described how the impressionist technique emulated effects from nature, but he admired Seurat's marks for their formal simplicity and was drawn to Seurat's "smooth" surfaces.

[60] Arsène Alexandre, "Le mouvement artistique," *Paris* (August 13, 1888). "Chaque objet dans la nature, chaque matière, a sa contexture particulière, qui ne peut être rendue par un procédé uniforme." Only a few of Seurat's contemporaries, like Paul Adam, viewed his touch as varied. Adam described that neo-impressionist process "varied infinitely," offering "extraordinary diversities of nuance in a hand, a limb, a piece of cloth." Paul Adam, "Peintres impressionnistes," *Revue contemporaine* 5 (April – May, 1886), 548-549. "…variée a l'infini, et qui constitue des diversités extraordinaires de nuance dans une main, dans un membre, dans un pan d'étoffe."

and light.[61] Others preferred "neo-impressionism," the term coined by Fénéon in the fall of 1886, which had no derogatory implication.[62]

Yet to the critics who insisted on calling Seurat's work "pointillist," what was at stake was nothing less than the nature of art. A true painter, in this view, is charged with the task of guiding the viewer, by sharing not only an image but a perception, even insight. A true painter employs his brush as an expressive extension of his spirit, making both small and precise marks as well as vast and dynamic ones that may evoke a blustery or tranquil or energetic mood. Marks with this variety of sizes, shapes, and textures thereby align themselves in a certain order — some sink into the background, others float to the surface — and this hierarchy encourages the eye to wander, pausing here, rushing there, enjoying a taste of narrative exploration as one meanders through the landscape of the canvas, choosing places to stop and admire. By using more uniform marks — "one might almost say… mechanical," impressionist Alfred Sisley commented — Seurat seemingly eliminated this dynamic and personal experience for the viewer.[63] After seeing Seurat's paintings at the *3rd Exhibition of Indépendants* in 1887, Huysmans concluded that Seurat's dots, rather than promising the viewer a journey across the canvas, presented a noisy chatter all at once, teeming with erratic blasts of color that "swarmed" before the viewer's eyes, demanding attention to all corners at once, prohibiting any opportunity to "rest."[64]

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[61] P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix,* 62. "Si ces peintres, que spécialiserait mieux l'épithète *chromo-luminaristes*, ont adopté ce nom de *néo-impressionnistes*…"

[62] Fénéon first used the term "neo-impressionism" in his article "L'impressionnisme aux Tuileries," *L'art moderne* 6 (September 19, 1886), reprinted in *Œuvres* 1:58.

[63] Unpublished letter of Sisley, 21 April 1898, in John Rewald, *Seurat* (New York, 1990), 173.

[64] Joris Karl Huysmans, "Chronique d'art: Les Indépendants," *La revue indépendante* 3 (April, 1887), 54. "ses pointillés grouillent…sans repose assuré." A perennial problem of tapestry was how to enliven a uniform surface, a problem solved through variation in color, not variation in texture.

Historically, differentiation in color also supported a painting's narrative. Placing warm colors in the fore and middle ground, for example, draws the viewer's eye to a specific moment, while placing cooler tones in the background guides the perception of recessional space. This was a convention known centuries earlier, by painters like Raphael, Titian, Claude, and Poussin. In the nineteenth century, many artists were beginning to accentuate the variation in color with an even greater variation in mark. As Fénéon explained, the Impressionists were exemplars of this approach: "The play of the hand varies according to what is represented: for water it slides, bristling furrows of paint; it is circular to bulge clouds; stiff and nimble to make the soil stand up."[65] These variations in mark defined a picture's atmosphere and helped guide the eye through pictorial space. While Huysmans struggled with the sketch-like quality of impressionist painting — he pejoratively called Monet's paintings "childlike" — he was equally derisive of Seurat's hand, which eliminated pictorial personality altogether. To Huysmans, Seurat's small touches destroyed a painting's hierarchy by dispersing the colors and marks all over; there was no narrative, no order.

Huysmans was not alone in the view that Seurat's marks were physically disorienting. In 1890, the writer Gustave Geffroy, champion and friend of Monet and Cézanne, agreed that "the insistent and too-marked technique inexorably wounds the most attentive viewers."[66] Painting (and painter) pushed the viewer away, forestalling the natural urge to get near a painting's surface and make a connection with the artist; to find, up close, some residue of the painter's touch. If viewers like Geffroy didn't feel invited

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[65] F. Fénéon, "L'impressionnisme aux Tuileries," in *Œuvres* 1:54. "…le jeu de la main varia avec l'effet à reproduire: il eut pour les eaux des glissements et le sillon des poils dans la pâte; il fut circulaire pour bomber des nuages, roide et preste pour hérisser un sol…"

[66] Gustave Geffroy, "Chroniques d'art: Indépendants," *Revue d'aujourd'hui* 1 (April 5, 1890), 270. "…l'obsédant procéde, trop marqué, blessera inexorablement le regard le plus attentive, le plus disposé a l'examen."

into a painting, where was the soul of the artist to be found? The question of where Seurat's personality lay was puzzling to many nineteenth-century viewers. Maus noted: "A personality, assuredly, but what kind?"[67] Geffroy proposed that Seurat's "personality had gone missing."[68] And many concluded, like Huysmans, that "underneath there is nothing, no thought, no soul, nothing."[69]

Like Huysmans and Geffroy, Fèvre found Seurat's technique physically irritating, writing in 1886 that, during his examination of *La Grande Jatte* he had to shield his eyes because of the painting's uncomfortable brightness, a whiteout intensity that he felt was deliberate: "one closes his eyes, a little because he is blinded…the intention of the painter is to blind."[70] Ironically these observers felt that Seurat's "automatic" marks involved little emotional input from the painter, yet they responded as if to a physical punch. To viewers like Fèvre and Geffroy, looking at Seurat's work also created a feeling of helplessness. With such a busy palette of colors and marks, the effect was too much like reality. Rather than finding a respite on the canvas, viewers confronted the same chaos and strain found in the world. The artist had failed to transform what he depicted, and only reproduced the restless, hectic madness of life. This neglected his most sacred duty as an artist: to imbue the work with meaning. One critic, Jules Antoine, concluded in the journal *Art et critique*, "such a preoccupation [to reproduce reality] doesn't depend on art," suggesting that the paintings of Seurat and his followers were nothing more than mechanical reproductions of the world.[71] By recreating the jumble of life, Seurat's

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[67] O. Maus, "Les vingtistes parisiens," 204. "Une personnalité, assurément, mais de quelle sorte?"
[68] G. Geffroy, "Chronique d'Arts: Indépendants," 270. "…la personnalité va manquer…"
[69] J.K. Huysmans, "Chronique d'art: Les indépendants," 54. "…le dessous est nul; aucune âme, aucune pensée, rien."
[70] H. Fèvre, "L'exposition des impressionnistes," 149. "Et l'on ferme les yeux, un peu parce qu'on est ébloui…on comprend l'intention du peintre, l'éblouissement…"
[71] Jules Antoine, "Les peintres néo-impressionnistes," *Art et critique* 2 (August 9, 1890), 510. "Il n'y a pas besoin d'expliquer qu'une semblable preoccupation ne depend plus de l'art."

painting did little more than mimic experiences from the world. There was nothing poetic or personal in this. It was a machine's approach — too literal, too raw, too materially bound.

Artists like Seurat, the young Symbolist critic Albert Aurier wrote, were "poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cave," foolishly thinking that the observed world (shadows, for the prisoners) is the real.[72] The enlightened artist, like Gauguin and van Gogh, could see a higher realm.[73] Seurat could not. While the apparent goal of the Neo-Impressionists was to remove the hand and simplify technique, the result was just the opposite: it put a premium on technique because it made mark-making so convoluted:

> Above all [neo-impressionism] unnecessarily complicates brushwork and manual execution, and as a result, contradicts its preemptory axiom of minimal action, one of its most incontestable goals: [quoting] 'It is necessary to obtain the most impressive effects possible with the least possible means.'[74]

This obsessive focus on technique, Aurier felt, bound neo-impressionism to base materialism. Seurat, then, was doubly materialist: reproducing the chaotic effect of the material world, and also hopelessly trapped by the tedious physicality of his technique. After seeing neo-impressionist canvases at the *8th Exhibition* in 1886, one of the leading voices of the Symbolist movement in France, Téodor de Wyzewa, agreed that the

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[72] Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* (March, 1891) in *Œuvres Posthumes* (Paris, 1893), 212. "…ils sont les pauvres stupides prisonniers de l'allégorique Caverne."

[73] Fénéon, like Aurier, was also a Symbolist. While both critics felt that art should communicate abstract *ideas*, Fénéon and Aurier were philosopically at odds. As Luc Sante explains, their language highlights radically divergent views: "Fénéon's language, enlisting the detachment and objectivity of science, partook of the same essence of the Pointillists' adamantine dots – so much like pixels…" Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines*, trans. and ed. Luc Sante (New York, 2007), xxvii. For a compelling discussion on the similarity of Seurat's staccato writing to his visual work see Richard Shiff, "Grave Seurat," in *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (University Park, 2009), 167 and Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Chahut* (Paris, 1989), 94.

[74] Albert Aurier, "Le néo-impressionnisme," in *Œuvres Posthumes* (Paris, 1893), 240. "D'arbord, elle complique, le plus souvent, sans nulle utilité, la facture, l'exécution manuelle, et est par conséquent, en contradiction avec ce péremptoire axiome de *l'actio minima*, qui est un des plus incontestables de l'esthétique: "*Il faut obtenir le plus grand effet possible avec les moindres moyens possibles*."

movement's painters were "highly mannered virtuosos."[75] The critic Alfonse Germain also categorized the Neo-Impressionists as self-conscious "virtuosos," dismissing their work as self-satisfied: "Seurat, Signac, Dubois-Pillet are complacent in their pointillist system; Renoir, Séon, Whistler juxtapose large marks and vary their procedures; the first are more virtuosos, the second more emotional."[76] Constraining himself to small, repetitive strokes was a self-conscious and affected ploy, Germain felt, just the opposite of Renoir's more "personal" art. To all of these critics, then, Seurat's approach was hollow and soulless, materialist in the extreme.[77]

Critics also attacked the neo-impressionist technique as devoid of authorship. In the same way that Seurat's brushwork lacked flair, it became difficult to discern which neo-impressionist painting had been wrought by which neo-impressionist painter; put bluntly, they all seemed alike. As Albert Michel reported in *L'art moderne*:

> There is a criticism aimed at the Neo-Impressionist school…that its mechanical methods lead to the suppression of all originality.... Nothing, it is said, resembles Monsieur Seurat more than Monsieur Signac; nothing resembles Monsieur Signac more than Monsieur Dubois-Pillet. The reproach is perhaps justified.[78]

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[75] Teodor de Wyzewa, "Une Critique: L'art contemporain," *La revue indépendante* (Nov, 1886), 70. "...nous intéressent comme les exercises de précieux virtuoses."

[76] Alfonse Germain, "L'exposition des indépendants," *Art et critique* 1 (September 15, 1889), 251. "Tandis que Seurat, Signac, Dubois-Pillet se complaisent dans le système du pointillé; Renoir, Séon, Wisthler juxtaposent de larges taches et varient leurs procédés; les premiers sont plus virtuoses, les secondes plus émotionnants."

[77] On technique and originality see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago – London, 1986).

[78] Albert Michel, "Le néo-impressionnisme," *L'art moderne* 8 (March 10, 1888), 84. "On fait, si j'entends bien, un autre reproche à l'école néo-impressionniste. Ce second argument consiste à dire que, par le cote en quelque sorte mécanique de ses procédés, elle conduit à supprimer toute originalité chez l'artise, ou plutôt que l'originalité est ici quelque chose de tout à fait superficeil et encombrant. Rien, dit-on, ne ressemble davantage à M. Seurat que M.Signac, à M.Signac que M. Dubois-Pillet. Le reproche est peut-être exact; mais, dans ce cas, il prouve nom pas précisément contre le procédé, mais plutôt contre l'artise." These comments annoyed Fénéon and Signac. John Rewald points out that it wasn't just Seurat and the Neo-impressionists that befuddled; some unscrupulous critics also had difficulty differentiating the works of the Impressionists and they couldn't even identify different media, sometimes confusing watercolor with painting. See J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 100.

Alfred Paulet echoed the concern, after seeing Seurat's work at the *4th Exhibition of the Indépendants* at the Pavillion de la Ville de Paris on the Champs-Élysées in 1888: "Scan the entire room and you will see the uniformity of the procedure…. their work always has the same appearance."[79] Two years earlier, George Moore wrote about his difficulty identifying the artists:

> The pictures were hung low, so I went down on my knees and examined the dotting in the pictures signed Seurat, and the dotting in those that were signed Pissarro. After a strict examination I was able to detect some differences, and I began to recognize the well-known touch even through this most wild and most wonderful transformation. Yes, owing to a long and intimate acquaintance with Pissarro and his work, I could distinguish between him and Seurat, but to the ordinary visitor their pictures were identical.[80]

Pissarro's "well-known touch" did surface for Moore, but only because of his familiarity with the artist.[81] Without more distinctive marks, it was nearly impossible to determine authorship; it may as well have been painted by a machine. As one critic summed it up, after viewing Seurat's paintings at *Les XX's 4th Exhibition*: "All pointillist paintings seem to come from the same 'factory.'"[82]

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[79] Alfred Paulet, "La vie artistique," *Le National* (March 27, 1888). "Parcourez toute leur salle et vous verrez l'uniformité de la manière. Voilà des peintres dont pas un, peut-être, n'a la même façon de sentir que l'autre, et pourtant leur ouvre à toujours même apparence…"

[80] George Moore, *Modern Painting* (New York, 1898), 89.

[81] Dubois-Pillet noted in 1886 that Pissarro had escaped the pitfalls of neo-impressionist monotony: "Pillet…felt that I had conquered the monotony [of neo-impressionism]…[but] was somewhat hurt by…the Signacs and…the strange rectilinear drawing of Seurat." Pissarro to Lucien, 3 December 1886: "…il m'a dit…que je m'étais débarrassé de la monotonie…Il a été un peu violenté par les deux petits Signacs et un petit peu aussi par l'étrange dessin rectiligne de Seurat…" in *Correspondance*, 2:79.

[82] Anonymous, "Le Salon de XX — L'ancien et le nouvel impressionnisme*," L'art moderne* (1887), 42. "Ceux qui soutiennent que tous les tableaux au pointillé semblent sortir d'une même 'fabrique'…"

THE MECHANICITY OF FIGURES

Many of Seurat's contemporaries were also dismissive of his representation of the human form. Some blamed the dots themselves as poorly suited to the fluidity of life, but others went even further, contending that the stiffness of Seurat's figures transcended the dots and was a flaw in the painter's way of looking at the human form. Huysmans wrote:

> Strip his figures of the colored fleas that cover them, underneath there is nothing... Nothingness in a body that consists only of contours. In *La Grande Jatte,* the human armature becomes rigid and hard; everything is immobilized and congealed.[83]

Even Seurat's greatest contemporary admirer, Fénéon, agreed that Seurat's figures could be formal and artificial: "One should have preferred that the figures circulating on the quay of *Port-en-Bessin* were less stiff" (Fig. 6). [84] Another critic commented acerbically in the journal *La Liberté* that *La Grande Jatte* was "a phantasmagoria drowned in green and yellow, where the figures, like marionettes, seem *automatically* fixed to the scenery."[85] Marcel Fouquier dismissed Seurat's figures as "farcical."[86] A critic for *L'art moderne* reported, "the figures [in La Grande Jatte] are wooden, naively modeled, like the toy soldiers that come to us from Germany."[87] Although the toy soldiers coming from Germany at that time were not literally made by machines, the suggestion of automation

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[83] J.K. Huysmans, "Chronique d'Art: Les indépendants," 54-55. "Décortiquez ses personnages des puces colorées qui les recouvrent, le dessous est nul; aucune âme, aucune pensée, rien. Un néant dans un corps dont les seuls contours existent. Ainsi que dans son tableau de la Grande Jatte, l'armature humaine devient rigide et dure; tout s'immobilise et se fige."

[84] F. Fénéon, "Cinquième exposition de la Société des artistes indépendants," *la Vogue* 4 (September, 1889), in *Oeuvres*, 1:165. "On voudrait moins ankylosés les personnages qui circulent sur le quai de *Port-en Bessin*…"

[85] "Les artistes indépendants," *La Liberté* (May 18, 1886). "…cette large toile est une fantasmagorie noyée dans le vert et le jaune, où les personnages, pareils à des marionettes, semblent automatiquement rivés au décor."

[86] Marcel Fouquier, "Les impressionnistes," *Le XIXe siècle* 17 (May 16, 1886), n.p. "Il y a un jockey coché et ayant perdu visiblement sa jambe à la dernière course de haies, ainsi qu'une jeune femme conduisant un singe en laisse qui sont très farce, dirait le joyeux Trublot."

[87] O. Maus, "Les vingtistes parisiens," 204. "Les figures sont en bois, naïvement sculptées au tour comme les petits soldats qui nous viennent d'Allemange…"

is nevertheless implicit in the remark; the soldier himself being a mechanistic figure — stiff, regulated, obeying orders. Alfred Paulet remarked:

> The artist has given his figures the mechanical gestures of lead soldiers who move about on the hinges of their diamond-shaped joints. Maids, clerks, soldiers all move with exactly the same slow, banal movement. The observation is… made mechanically.[88]

Fèvre, who had criticized Seurat's colors as "blinding," was more generous when it came to the artist's representation of figures, suggesting that the stiffness Seurat depicted was a commentary on his subjects, and a depiction of "the rigidity of Parisian leisure, stiff and tired, where even recreation is posed."[89] Paul Adam, the novelist who admired Seurat, agreed:

> And even the stiffness of these people, their punched-out forms, help to give the sound of the modern, to recall our badly cut clothes, clinging tight to our bodies, the reserve of our gestures, the British cant we all imitate. We strike attitudes like people in a painting by Memling.[90]

For other critics, there was an uncomfortable disconnect between Seurat's landscapes and figures, his landscapes managing to escape the stiffness in which his figures froze and ground to a halt. Jean Le Fustec, noting the discrepancy between landscape and figures in *La Grande Jatte* observed:

> I share the amusement of the public in front of the wooden characters acting as loaves of bread in this canvas. They are a band of petrified beings, motionless; mannequins that make the mistake of attracting the attention of the public and

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[88] Alfred Paulet, "Les impressionnistes," *Paris* (June 5, 1886). Quoted in H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 160. "L'artiste a donné à ses personnages les gestes automatiques de soldats de plomb se mouvant sur des losanges articulés. Bonnes, employés, troupiers vont d'un même mouvement lent, banal, tout pareil, qui dit bien le caractère de la scène, mais le dit avec trop d'insistance."

[89] H. Fèvre, "L'exposition des impressionnistes," 149. "…on comprend ensuite la raideur de la badauderie parisienne, compasée et avachie, et dont la recreation même est poseuse."

[90] Paul Adam, "Peintres impressionnistes," *Revue contemporaine 5* (April – May, 1886), 551. "Et même la raideur des gens, les formes à l'emporte-pièce contribuent à donner le son du moderne, le rappel de nos costumes étriqués, collés au corps, la réserve des gestes, le cant britannique par tous imité. Nous prenons des attitudes pareilles à celles des personnages de Memling. M.Seurat l'a parfaitement vu, compris, conçu et traduit avec le pur dessin des primitifs."

> pushing them to laugh. Leave them out and you are left in the presence of a pure and simple landscape, a serious, powerful, and moving work.[91]

Laughter is a release, a palliative that helps us deal with the potential threat of the automatic. As the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in his 1900 "An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," "the rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective."[92] In looking at Seurat (through Bergson), viewers laughed at the rigidity, the mechanicity, and the automatic that they perceived in his figures, laughing at what they feared they would become, an especially prevalent and relevant concern in the context of late nineteenth-century industrialization and mechanization.

Seurat responded to this criticism with *Poseuses* and *Parade de Cirque*, large figurative paintings designed to demonstrate the evocative potential of neo-impressionism (Fig. 7 & 8). But the attempt fell flat to many viewers, and his paintings received more of the same scorn. One observer from the journal *L'Echo du Nord* described *Les Poseuses* as, "a studio where three nude women… expose lamentable rachitic skeletons smeared with all the colors of the rainbow."[93] Another anonymous observer described being repulsed by the women. "From two or three steps away the figures seem to suffer from a sickness of lamentable skin; they are scaly…one moves back for fear of contagion."[94] Not only did viewers feel they had to move back from a

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[91] Jean Le Fustec, "Exposition de la société des artistes indépendants," *Le journal des artistes* (August 22, 1886). Reprinted in H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 292. "…je partage l'hilarité du public devant les bonshommes en bois qui jouent la foire au pain d'épice dans cette toile. Ils sont là une bande d'êtres petrifiés, immobiles, de mannequins qui ont le tort de fixer l'attention du public et de le pousser au rire. Supprimez-les, il vous reste le paysage pur et simple, et vous êtes alors en présence d'une oeuvre sérieuse, puissante, émouvante."

[92] Henri Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris, 1940; originally published in 1900), 16. "Cette raideur est le comique, et le rire en est le châtiment."

[93] Anon., "Lettre de Paris," *L'Écho du Nord* (March 29, 1888). ""Un Atelier…où trois femmes nues…offrent de lamentables squelettes rachitiques bariolés de toutes les nuances de l'arc-en-ciel…"

[94] Anon., "Paris Artiste," *L'Observatuer Français* (March 26, 1888). "A deux ou trois pas de distance ses personnages ont l'air de souffrir d'une malade de peau lamentable; ils sont écailleux, et leur écailles offrent toutes les colorations du prisme. On se recule un peu par peur de la contagion, et à vingt-cinq mètres ou cinquante, on cesse d'être choqué…il faut cette distance."

technique that assaulted (Fèvre, Geffroy) but they also had to protect themselves from unsettling and sickly figures. Disturbing in their vacuous gazes, Seurat's subjects were dehumanized: "mannequins," "dolls," "soldiers." Seurat's marks (small and diminutive, without variation) and his figures (stiff and mechanical) struck a discordant note that resonated painfully for an audience in the throes of the Second Industrial Revolution, as we shall soon see.

THE DISEMBODIED MARK

The notion of the expressive, impasto mark as a benchmark of "real art" was, by Seurat's time, one with a rich and complex history. Far more than an artistic trend, it had become an axiom rooted deeply in the social and cultural fabric of a society still grappling with the impact of the first Industrial Revolution. As I will discuss later, the defensive response of Seurat's contemporaries to his "dots" cannot be separated from the evolving norms of an era that saw massive technological advance, the rapid displacement of men by machines, and, for painting itself, the slow creep of photography as an alternative form of pictorial representation. Perhaps it is only now, in the age of the digital image, that we can remove ourselves from these precepts and contrast Seurat's technique with the truly machine-distilled images that dominate twenty-first century life. But in Seurat's time, the requisite distance was not yet available, and the pressure on painters to distinguish their work through personal touch, using the physicality of the impasto mark, had reached a high-water mark. A painter's handling of paint became, for many artists and critics, the defining element of his work. Mark-making was not merely a tool of painters; it was the quintessential measure of expressive ability, the embodiment of the painter's soul. As Charles Blanc wrote: "Touch is the handwriting of the painter,

the stroke of his mind."[95] Likewise, in his famous 1845 defense of Corot, Baudelaire proposed that "finished" paintings — those that had smooth and polished surfaces — were actually less complete than "unfinished" ones, because they lacked expressive clarity. "There is a great difference between a work that is complete and work that is finished," he wrote. "In general, what is complete is not finished, and a thing that is highly finished need not be complete at all."[96] Many artists felt that the conventions of the French Academy, with its standardized notions of beauty, had for years neglected the personal touch of the painter. "Today, you go along the galleries of the Salon, without approaching one work with character that forces you to stop. All of the paintings look the same, the products of the same industrial manufacture" the critic Theophile Thoré lamented after visiting the Salon of 1844.[97] In their quest for absolute beauty, Thoré and Baudelaire agreed, the Academics were unable to express individual artistic impulses. Delacroix attributed the failure of Academic painting to this mathematical precision, the same condemnation that would later be applied to Seurat: "They [students at Academy] are taught the beautiful as one teaches algebra."[98] This formulaic approach was not limited to composition but also the handling of paint, which had to be clean and smooth, with gleaming surfaces.

It was against this backdrop that the impasto mark began to re-emerge in the mid-nineteenth century. Of course, impasto had been used before — by Titian and Veronese

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[95] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, intro. Claire Barbillon (Paris, 2000; original ed., Paris, 1867), 543. "Oui, la touche est l'écriture du peintre, c'est la frappe de son esprit."

[96] Charles Baudelaire, "Salon de 1845," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1976), 390. "…qu'il y a une grande différence entre un morceau *fait* et un morceau *fini* – qu'en général ce qui est *fait* n'est pas *fini,* et qu'une chose très *finie* peut n'être pas *faite* du tout…"

[97] Theophile Thoré, "Le Salon de 1844," *Salons de T.Thoré* (Paris, 1868), 33-34. "Aujour'dui, vous allez de long des galeries du Salon, sans qu'aucune œuvre caractérisée vous force à vous arrêter. Tous les tableaux se ressemblent. On dirait les produits de la même manufacture industrielle."

[98] Quoted in John Rewald, *The History* of *Impressionism* (New York, 1980), 22.

in the Venetian Renaissance, by Tintoretto and El Greco in the Mannerist period, and by Rubens and Rembrandt in the Baroque — but it would achieve a newfound emphasis and popularity in nineteenth-century painting. As young painters in the mid-nineteenth century learned to draft early studies for their work, known as études, they began to embrace extemporaneous work, often dashed off in the space of half an hour, as a more organic expression of their experience in the landscape than the polished works they were expected to develop from those studies. In time, many young painters, like Corot, Courbet, and Daubigny began to incorporate the feeling and atmosphere of the études into their final works, especially the reliance on impasto marks. By the 1860s, painters like Pissarro and Cézanne had come to regard impasto as the single most essential aspect of their work — its honesty, its immediacy, and crucially, its personality. Building layer upon layer of thick paint with their palette knives, they eliminated the smoothing impulse of the Academic tradition and left the raw urgency of impasto in its place. Antony Valabrègue explained how one Academic, seeing a portrait of himself painted by Cézanne, exclaimed that it was painted "not only with a knife but even with a gun," highlighting both the explosive quality of the mark-making and the subversive, even violent, rejection of artistic convention (Fig. 9).[99]

By the time of Seurat's emergence in the 1880s, he could hardly have chosen a more loathsome idiom than the formal and measured mark, which many artists associated so closely with Academic techniques they had spent two decades escaping. Leading up to the debut of *La Grande Jatte* in 1886, many Impressionists — including Monet, Renoir, and Sisley — were so disgusted at the prospect of being exhibited alongside Seurat that

[99] Letter from Antony Valabrègue to Fortuné Marion, April 1866. In Joachim Pissarro, *Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne and Pissarro* 1865-1885 (New York, 2005), 37. Alfred Barr Jr. and M.Scolari, "Cézanne in the Letters of Marion to Morsatt, 1865-1868," *Magazine of Art* (Feb, April, May, 1938). John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York, 1986), 139.

they withdrew their work from the exhibit, forcing the name of the show to change from *The 8th Impressionist Exhibition* to *The 8th Independent Exhibition*. Signac recounted in a letter to Verhaeren: "They [the Impressionists] are furious at us: a terrible hatred."[100]

As the Seurat scholar Michelle Foa has written, their offense was not entirely misplaced: Seurat's theory was, in fact, Anti-Impressionist in several ways.[101] Fénéon later remarked on the difference:

> The first impressionists sought to show how our view of sky, water and earth varied from moment to moment. Their goal was to record on canvas one of these fleeting apparitions. This resulted in the need to capture a landscape in a single session, and the tendency to exaggerate the features of nature in order to prove that it was a unique moment that would never be seen again. What the neo-impressionists are trying to do, is to synthesize landscape into a definitive aspect which will perpetuate that sensation."[102]

At the most fundamental and elemental level, Seurat's aim as an artist was distinct from the Impressionists: while Impressionists marveled at the shifting quality of nature, Seurat was less interested in capturing nature as he found it, than in conveying an image already in his mind. According to his friend Charles Angrand, Seurat actually orchestrated scenes to create the landscape he preferred. While joining Seurat during the painting of *La Grande Jatte*, for example, Angrand witnessed the artist arranging boats in a particular order, and wrote that he helped Seurat keep the grass neatly mowed.[103] Monet, by

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[100] Paul Signac to Émile Verhaeren, printed in Robert Herbert, "Seurat and Émile Verhaeren: unpublished letters," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 54, 1091 (December, 1959), 327, 317. "Ceux-ci sont furieux contre nous: une haine terrible."

[101] Michelle Foa, "Georges Seurat: Picturing Perception" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2008).

[102] F. Fénéon, "Le néo-impressionnisme" in *Œuvres*, 1:73-74. "Le spectacle du ciel, de l'eau, des verdures varie d'instant en instant, professaient les premiers impressionnistes. Empreindre une de ces fugitives apparences sur le subjective, c'est le but. – De là résultainet la nécessité d'enlever un paysage en une séance et une propension à faire grimacer la nature pour bien prouver que la minute était unique et qu'on ne la reverrait jamais plus. Synthétiser le paysage dans un aspect definitive qui en perpétue la sensation, à cela tâchent les néo-impressionnistes."

[103] Angrand recalled to G. Coquiot, "From 1885-86, I often worked alongside of Seurat on the island of La Grande Jatte. As the vigorous grass of summer became high on the bank and blocked the view of a boat that he placed in the foreground…I cut the grass for him." G. Coquiot, *Seurat,* 39. "En 1885-86, souvent je suis descendu travailler à l'île de la Grande-Jatte à côté de lui. Comme l'herbe d'été vigoureuse devenait

contrast, actively embraced the unkempt aspects of nature and struggled to capture its wildness. Seurat sought days that were calm and cloudless. As he wrote to Signac in 1886, from Honfleur, "the wind, and therefore the clouds, have inconvenienced me these past days."[104]

This was more than a stylistic difference; it was rooted in a deep division about the responsibility of art. To Impressionists, embracing the unpredictability of nature was essential to a philosophic understanding of their work. Whereas the Academic painters against whom they often defined themselves viewed nature with skepticism, something to contain and control on the canvas, eliminating the "accidents" of the sun and the changing colors of varying light, the Impressionists believed themselves more honest by attempting to convey those shifting colors, and representing nature precisely as it was — as it *felt*. Yet here, Seurat really did have something in common with the Academics. His effort to bring consistency in his color choices was a return to the kind of contrivance that Impressionists hoped to replace, a system they regarded as defunct.

Impressionists also took offense at Seurat's manner of working: spending hours and even months in his studio on a single painting, composing and refining the image. This too was reminiscent of the Academics. For the Impressionists, a central distinction of their method lay in the difference between making and finding. In *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, Richard Shiff notes that nineteenth-century French critics and artists, particularly Couture, regarded the act of *making* art as self-conscious and deliberate, whereas the act of *finding* involves a break from convention and enjoys connotations of artistic naiveté and honesty. By responding directly and immediately to

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haute sur la berge et l'empêchait de voir une barque qu'il avait mise us tout premier plan…je fus lui rendre ce service de couper cette herbe…"

[104] Seurat to Signac, 25 June 1886, "Le vent et par conséquent les nuages m'ont gêné ces jours derniers. La stablité des premières journées devrait bien revenir." In H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, L1.

the landscape around them, without preconceived ideas of compositional arrangement, the Impressionist *finds* but does not *make* his painting.[105] The random order of nature becomes freeing, because it releases the artist from the contrived aesthetic preferences of culture.

Seurat's careful and slow method were the antithesis of finding. Again, the neo-impressionist method had become an echo of the Academic past. While an impressionist painting (theoretically) transferred the experience of having-been-there to the viewer, each touch evoking a moment felt, a neo-impressionist painting was made of abstract marks that conveyed no particular experience.[106] ("Too much system…not enough life," Huysmans retorted.)[107] For Renoir, this rendered the work of Seurat and his comrades inert. He pronounced Seurat's work "incomprehensible," and lamented that he couldn't

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[105] Richard Shiff has shown however that Monet and the other Impressionists actually worked very hard to *construct* the image of spontaneity in their paintings, when in reality they often reworked and finished their paintings in studio – in other words, they tried to hide their making, disguising it as something found. With the emergence of neo-impressionism, Monet's fervent supporters were also on the defense and claimed that not only could Monet do nature better than anyone but he was also a serious painter. Mirbeau, hijacking the qualities attributed to Seurat, claimed that Monet painted "according to a methodical, rational plan, of inflexible rigor, in some ways mathematical;" his was an art that came from "reflective thought, of comparison, analysis, knowing will." And Monet "doesn't respond to the chance of inspiration…to the whim of the brush…the drama is made scientifically, the harmony of forms accord to atmospheric laws, with the regular and precise march of terrestial and celestial phenomena…" "Il divisa son travail, sur un plan méthodique, rationnel, d'une inflexible rigeur, en quelque sorte mathémathique." Octave Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *Le Figaro* (March, 1889), 1. "En rien, en ce resplendissement, n'est livré au hazard de l'inspiration, meme heureuse, à la fantaisie du coup de pinceau, même genial…Le drame est combiné scientifiquement, l'harmonie des fromes s'accorde avec les lois atmosphériques, avec la marcher égulière et precise des phénomènes terrestres et célestes…" Octave Mirbeau, "Claude Monet – Auguste Rodin," *L'art moderne* 9, 27 (July 7, 1889), 210. See Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the 90s: the series paintings* (Boston, 1989), 58.

[106] Meyer Schapiro writes that, because of their abstract, non-representational nature, the marks of the neo-Impressionist are actually more effective than those of the Impressionists at recreating "pure sensation." See his discussion "Le Contraste Simultané en Peinture," in *Exposés et discussions du Colloque du Centre de Recherches de Psychologie* (Paris, 1957), 249.

[107] J.K. Huysmans, "Chronique d'art: Les indépendants," 55."J'ai décidément peur qu'il n'y ait trop de procédés, trop de systèmes, et pas assez de flamme qui pétille, pas assez de vie!"

take the paintings "in hand" and "walk around them."[108] Because Renoir perceived Seurat's touch as meek and uniform, he also read his paintings as flat and one-dimensional. Instead of subtle variation in mark, Renoir found a mass of "incomprehensible" touches, each dangling coldly and alone without any emotional impact. The critic Jules Antoine compared the effect to Academics outright: "We justifiably reproach [Academics] M Meissonier and M Roybet, and many others, for executing clothing and people, furniture and tapestry, all with the same touch. It seems to me that pointillism arrives at exactly the same result."[109]

By abandoning the varied, pronounced, and spontaneous mark, and constraining himself to more uniform ones, Impressionists felt that Seurat was working against his own sensations. During his experimentation with neo-impressionism, which began in 1886, Pissarro wondered:

> How can one have the purity and simplicity of the dot with the fullness, suppleness, liberty, spontaneity and freshness of sensation of impressionist art? This is the question that preoccupies me, for the dot is meager, lacking in body, diaphanous, more monotonous than simple, even in Seurat, particularly the Seurats…[110]

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[108] Renoir as told to Ambroise Vollard in A. Vollard, *En écountant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir*, 211. "…on vous prévenait dès l'entrée que pour comprendre ce que représentait la toile, encore fallait-il se mettre à une distance de deux mètres cinquante. Et moi qui aime tourner autour d'un tableau le prendre en main!"

[109] J. Antoine, "Les peintres néo-impressionnistes," 510. "L'on reproche très justement a M. Meissonier, a M. Roybet, et a bien d'autres, d'exécuter un habit et une figure, un meuble et une tapisserie, avec la même touche. Il me semble que le pointillisme arrive exactement au même resultat."

[110] Pissarro to Lucien, 6 September 1888, in *Correspondance*, 2:251, "Que faire pour avoir les qualités de pureté, de simplicité, du point, et le gras, la souplesse, la liberté, la spontanéité, la fraîcheur de sensation de notre art impressionniste? Voilà la question, cela me préoccupe beaucoup, car le point est maigre, sans consistence, diaphane, plus monotone que simple, même les Seurat, surtout les Seurat…Je suis très préoccupe de la question…" For Pissarro, simplicity was a great virtue. During his early embrace of neo-impressionism, he felt that the expressiveness associated with the impasto mark was a throwback to Romanticism, the visible touch an empty and obsolete sign that had run its course. In contrast, the neo-impressionist dot was clean, crisp, and "simple" — driven by objective scientific theory — and the quiet, steady, and unfussy mark challenged the prevalent notion that expression resided within touch. See Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, 1996), 250.

Pissarro couldn't get used to the fact that the "dot" occupied so little space and lacked the physicality of the impressionist mark. It seemed feeble by comparison. After five years of working in the neo-impressionist mode, Pissarro ultimately abandoned it in 1890. Despite his declaration in 1888 that neo-impressionism made him "free to express myself," he quickly found the process formulaic and repetitive, with little room for spontaneous innovation.[111] A year before abandoning the method, he wrote to his son Lucien, in 1889: "I am at this moment looking for a way to replace the dot; so far I have not found what I want, the work in execution does not seem rapid enough and does not respond simultaneously with sensation…"[112] Because of the Neo-Impressionists' interest in preserving the purity of color, they waited for each layer of paint to dry before applying the next. This was frustrating to the artist who, in his impressionist work, had painted spontaneously, letting his hand freely follow the stream of sensation with what he described as a feeling of "inevitability." Sensation was the unschooled response to nature — free, simple, honest, pure — and neo-impressionism had no suitable alternative; with its deliberate technique, sensation slowed down and original feelings dulled into phantom distillations.[113] In his most virulent attack on neo-impressionism, an 1896 letter to Henry van de Velde, Pissarro described:

> …the impossibility of following my sensations, and consequently giving life, movement, the impossibility of following the ever so varied and admirable effects of nature, the impossibility of giving a particular character to my drawing, I had to

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[111] Many commentators, like Émile Verhaeren and later Julius Meier-Graefe, André Salmon, Robert Rey, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, contend that Seurat was the only artist capable of working as a neo-impressionist, arguing that in the hands of artists like Signac, Henri Edmond Cross, and Dubois-Pillet, Seurat's technique turned to pure formula.

[112] Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 20 February 1889, in *Correspondence*, 2:266. "…je cherche en ce moment le moyen de remplacer les points; jusqu'à ce moment je ne suis pas arrivé à ce que je désire, le travail d'exécution ne me paraissant pas assez rapide et ne répondant pas assez simultanément à la sensation…."

[113] See Joachim Pissarro's definition of sensation and his explanation of Pissarro's view on schools. J. Pissarro, *Pioneering Modern Painting,* 21.

> give it up, it was time. Luckily, it has to be believed that I wasn't made for this art that gives me the sensation of leveling, of death.[114]

Pissarro compared neo-impressionism to death because it lacked the instability of life.[115] It left nothing uncovered. There was no space for what Fénéon called the "fortuitous discoveries" of impressionism.[116] Pissarro had begun to yearn for these discoveries, and for the freedom of *finding* that he had experienced as an Impressionist. After abandoning neo-impressionism in 1890, he wrote in May of the next year, "The Impressionists are in the right, a healthy and honest art based on sensation."[117] Compared to the rich and viscous quality of the impressionist mark, Pissarro found the "dot" of neo-impressionism "diaphanous." On December 10, 1893, he wrote, "As for me, my nest is made, I remain with the Old [Impressionists]…I renounce [neo-impressionism]."[118] He encouraged Signac to do the same, pleading in an 1894 letter:

> I find the [neo-impressionist] method itself bad. Instead of helping the artist, it paralyzes and freezes him…I am far from believing that you have taken the direction suited to your essentially painter's temperament, . . . Think it over carefully and see if the moment has not come to develop toward an art more concerned with sensations, more free, and more in conformity with your nature.[119]

Signac, however, responded:

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[114] Camille Pissarro to Henry van de Velde, 27 March 1896, in *Correspondence*, 4:179. "Après bien des efforts, ayant constaté (je parle pour mon proper compte) ayant constaté l'impossibilité de suivre mes sensations, par conséquent de donner la vie, le mouvement, l'impossibilité de donner un caractère particulier à mon dessin, j'ai dû renoncer, it était temps. Heureusement, il faut croire que je n'étais pas fait pour cet art qui me donne la sensation du nivellement de la mort!"

[115] See Martha Ward, *Neo-Impressionism and the Spaces of the Avante-Garde*, footnote 4, p, 326.

[116] F. Fénéon, "L'impressionnisme aux Tuileries," in *Oeuvres,* 1:54. "…aux fortuites trouvailles de l'improvisation…"

[117] Camille to Lucien Pissarro, 13 May 1891, *Correspondance,* 3:82. "Les impressionnistes sont dans le vrai, c'est l'art sain basé sur les sensations et c'est honnête."

[118] Pissarro to Lucien, 10 December 1893, *Correspondance*, 3:407. "…quant à moi, mon nid est fait, je reste dans les vieux, Signac aurait bien voulu me décider, j'y renonce."

[119] Pissarro to Signac, 23 January 1894 in *Correspondance*, 3:423-24. "…je trouve que la méthode même est mauvaise. Au lieu de servir l'artiste l'ankylose (le fige) le glace…je suis loin de trouver que vous êtes - dans la voie qui convient à votre tempérament essentiellement peintre…Réfléchissez mûrement et voyez si le moment n'est pas venu de faire votre évolution vers un art plus de sensation, plus libre et qui serait plus conforme à votre nature." Original letter with crossouts 23 Jan; rewrite 27 Jan.

> I am convinced that, however poor in fact my method of painting may strike you, you must necessarily regard as unjust this too sweeping indictment of a serious and sincere artist, and that you cannot but believe that ten years of persistent and disinterested effort deserve better treatment…While I am convinced that we are on the right track, I am even more convinced that we have still a long way to go. There is all the more reason not to be discouraged; on the contrary, it is necessary to persevere and work hard. — Moreover, neither charm of impaste [impasto] nor the savor of soft tones can tempt me or stray me from my path. For seven years now I have set myself against their easy and enticing promises.[120]

His loyalty to neo-impressionism was spiked, however, with periodic frustration. Faithful though he was to Seurat, Signac had difficulty with some of the artist's work. After seeing *La Grande Jatte* in 1887 [at Les XX in Brussels], he wrote to Pissarro:

> In my opinion, *La Grande Jatte* loses a little in that big hall. It displays a certain meticulousness, which at that distance is unnecessary and disappears. One feels that this large canvas has been painted in a small room without much space for stepping back sufficiently. As a matter of fact this was an observation made by several members of Les XX. They told Seurat: 'We like your *Grande Jatte* better at a close range than from a certain distance. You probably did not paint it in a large room.' It is evident that this infinitely delicate division, exquisite on smaller canvases, becomes too timid for a canvas of several yards. Obviously, for a ceiling decoration, the brushstroke must be larger than for an easel painting.[121]

For Signac, Seurat's dots disappeared in the wrong setting, their "meticulousness" eviscerated by the cavernous hall. Instead of dazzling the viewer with bright light and color, the impeccable dabs of pigment disintegrated into a forgettable dullness. Signac felt that Seurat had ignored the need to adjust method to a work's size, an idea taken from Blanc's precept: "The first law of taste… is that the touch ought to be large in big works

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[120] Signac to Pissarro, 25 January 1891 in *Correspondance*, 3:424-425. "…si mauvaise que vous puisse sembler actuellement ma méthode de peindre, vous ne pouvez vous empêcher de trouver injuste cette critique, trop de parti-pris contre un artiste convaincu et sincère et, de penser que dix ans de travail acharné et désintéressé méritant mieux…Si je suis persuadé que nous sommes dans la bonne voie, je suis encore plus certain que nous ne sommes pas au bout et qu'il y a encore beaucoup de chemin à faire. Raison de plus pour ne pas se décourager; il faut au contraire persévérer et travailler ferme. D'ailleurs, ce n'est ni le charme de l'empâtement, ni la saveur des tons rabattus, qui peuvent me tenter et m'arrêter en route…Il y a sept ans que j'ai renoncé à leurs alléchantes et faciles satisfaction."

[121] Signac to Camille Pissarro, March-April, 1887, in John Rewald, *The History of Post-Impressionism* (New York, 1962), 104. [unpublished document]

and delicate in small ones."[122] By 1897, Signac's concern for the size of Seurat's brushstrokes had hardened to annoyance: in a journal entry, he noted that the touches in Seurat's *Poseuses* (1887) were "too divided…too small. They create a mechanical and diminutive look…" (Fig. 7).[123] As a screen of undifferentiated specks, Signac felt that the marks in *Poseuses* were meek, too repetitive to reproduce the dazzling effects of color and light.[124]

Signac himself may have tired of the technique towards the end of his life. He spoke increasingly of the need to renew his sensation in front of the model and he turned to watercolor at Pissarro's suggestion, praising the medium in his journal as fluid and liberating. "When I am painting a watercolor, I see myself in memory, seventeen years ago," he wrote in 1899, referencing his early years as an Impressionist, when he painted blithely, "by smearing on reds, greens, blues, and yellows without much care but with enthusiasm."[125] The systematic tedium of neo-impressionism, he seemed to imply, had drained him of that enthusiasm. Perhaps Signac also sensed that his work was becoming repetitive.

If the size of Seurat's dots on a large canvas had been troubling to Signac, the large canvases themselves were troubling to many Impressionists. It had been a point of pride for Impressionists that they could pick up their paintings and carry them along,

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[122] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, 544. "La première loi du goût, en ces matières, c'est que la touche doit être large dans les grands ouvrages, et précieuse dans les petits."

[123] Paul Signac, journal entry 28 Decemeber 1897, in J. Rewald, ed., "Extraits du journal inédit de Paul Signac, II: 1897-1898," 270-271. "Elle [*Les Poseuses*] est trop divisée, la touche en est trop petite. Cela donne un aspect mécanique et petit à celle belle peinture. Les parties unies, comme le fond, par example, couvertes de ces petites touches, sont désagéables et ce travail paraît inutile et nuisable, car il donne à l'ensemble une tonalité grise."

[124] In reality, Signac's mark is more constrained and repetitive than Seurat's.

[125] Paul Signac, journal entry 12 April 1899, in J. Rewald, "Extraits," 52. "Et pendant que je fais une aquarelle, je revois des souvenirs d'il y a déjà dix-sept ans…Il y avait deux mois que je faisais de la peinture, j'avais vingt ans. – L'année après, j'y revins et j'en remportai une quarantaine de toiles 'impressionnistes.' Ça consistait à empâter des rouges, des verts, des blues et des jaunes, sans grand souci, mais avec enthousiasme."

whereas Academic painters often depended on machinery to lift their large and cumbersome work. Impressionists felt that Academic painters themselves had become "grandes machines," producing massive and unapproachable art that eclipsed the possibility of intimacy or emotion. Likewise, they attacked the size of Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* as a reminder of the unwieldy Academic works they had defined their own painting against. In a letter to Lucien, Pissarro recalled how Degas immediately rejected *La Grande Jatte*'s size: "I told Degas that Seurat's painting was very interesting: 'I would have noted that myself, Pissarro, except that the painting is so big!"[126] Critical reviews from 1886 also commented that the size overwhelmed the exhibition around it.

THE SCIENCE OF COLOR

The fixation on Seurat's use of color would also become a recurring theme among his contemporary critics, and again the critique was tied to a perception of the artist as mechanistic and detached. Many critics reacted with horror, for example, to reports that Seurat's notions of color were based on scientific formulas. Science, they believed, was the antithesis of art. It drew on absolutes and objectivity, whereas art was meant to be subjective and intuitive. After seeing Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* at the *8th Independent Exhibition* in Paris (1886), Roger Marx questioned: "Doesn't one have the right to be a bit afraid of the new mode of painting that one achieves by scientific analysis, that is, by what is most opposed to art?"[127] A few contemporaries, like Fénéon and Paul Adam,

[126] Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 8 May 1886, in *Correspondance*, 2:45. "J'ai dit à Degas que le tableau de Seurat était fort intéressant: 'Oh! Je m'en apercevrai bien, Pissarro, seulement que c'est grand!'…"
[127] Roger Marx, "Les indépendants," *Le Voltaire* (August 21, 1886). "…n'est-on pas en droit de s'affrayer un peu de ce nouveau mode de peinture au quel on parvient par l'analyse scientifique, c'est-à-dire par ce qui se trouve le plus opposé à l'art?"

embraced what they perceived as a scientific approach in Seurat's work, but a larger majority were skeptical. The journalist Maurice Beaubourg disparaged Seurat's belief "in the necessity and sufficiency of science and chemistry in art," while Charles Morice scorned "the pernicious confusion of art and science, the most dangerous error in the history of art."[128] Critic Julien Leclercq, a friend of Gauguin's, lamented that painters like Seurat confused "art with science," and Symbolist Téodor de Wyzewa added that Seurat's interest in color theory killed sensation and produced art controlled by "external formulas."[129] Morice further cautioned that Seurat's work was an "art reduced to technique … a kind of new and useless science [with] the hands in charge of the head."[130] To Morice, Seurat's approach was nothing more than a rote manual technique, hands working automatically, disconnected from the mind, like some rigidly controlled process in a scientific lab. And perhaps the most stinging criticism of Seurat's method as scientific came from his former friend, Gauguin, who experimented with the neo-impressionist technique and, like Pissarro, found it sorely wanting. Gauguin accused Seurat of trying to produce art from the "latest chemical, physical, scientific research," and ending up, instead, with a "heap of accurate colors" that were "lifeless" and "frozen."[131] He scorned the artist who "peers through his opera glasses at the right color and dexterously applies [it] to the canvas, in squares prepared in advance," and in a 1903 letter to Morice wrote, "we have experienced a long period of misleading strategies,

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[128] Charles Morice, in J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 12. G. Coquiot, *Seurat*, 47. "Mais imbu à un tel point de la nécessité et de la suffisance de la science et de la chimie dans l'art, que j'en restai ébaubi." Charles Morice, "Le XXIe Salon des Indépendants," *Mercure de France* (April 15. 1905), 540. "…d'une confusion néfaste entre l'art et la science, date la plus dangereuse erreur de l'histoire de l'art?"

[129] Teodor de Wyzewa, "L'art contemporain," *La revue indépendante* (1886), 70. "La vie n'est point, parce qu'ils ont négligé d'être sincères, trop séduits des formules extérieures."

[130] Quoted in Richard Shiff, "Puppet and Test Pattern: Mechanicity and Materiality," in *From Energy and Information, Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford, 2002), 343.

[131] Paul Gauguin to his wife Mette, in *Lettres à Gauguin*, 221. Seurat resented Gauguin's air of superiority. See J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 148.

centered on physics, chemistry, the mechanical and the study of nature."[132] Aurier, decried the purported influence of scientist Charles Henry on Seurat and dismissed scientists entirely as "obtuse bastards."[133] He denigrated the "harlequinlike vision of the pointillists" and in place of Seurat's rational and "scientific" approach, he preferred what he called a "mystical" one:

> …it is mysticism alone that can save our society from brutalization, sensualism and utilitarianism… We will have returned through positive science to a pure and simple bestiality. We must react. We must re-cultivate in ourselves the superior qualities of the soul. We must become mystics again. We must learn to love again, source of all understanding.[134]

Seurat's art didn't attempt to transcend the superficialities of the world; it was driven instead by the pedestrian impulse to depict "objective" reality. It was utilitarian, bound by tools; it was math and science, didactic to its core. For Aurier, Seurat didn't aspire to depict anything beyond the "pure and simple bestiality" of the visible world.[135]

Others shared the perception that Seurat's painting was lost in a rut of literalism. Jules Christophe, in 1890, ended his otherwise praiseworthy article on Seurat in an issue of *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui* devoted to the artist, with the caution, "[his work] is logical, perhaps too logical."[136] In the article "Types d'artistes," from *L'art moderne*,

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[132] Quoted in André Chastel, "Seurat et Gauguin," *Art de France* 2 (1962), 300. "…nous venons de subir en art un très grande période d'égarement causée par la physique, la chimie, le mécanisme et l'étude de la nature…"

[133] A. Aurier, "Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critque," (1890-93), in *Œuvres*, 175. "…mais bien ces bâtardes obtuses de la science, les sciences naturelles."

[134] A. Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture," in *Œuvres*, 207, "…l'arlequinesque vision des pointillistes…" A. Aurier, "Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique," (1892) in *Œuvres*, 201-202. "…c'est le mysticisime qui seul peut sauver notre société de l'abrustissement, du sensualisme et de l'utilitarisme….nous serons revenus, par la science positive, à l'animalité pure et simple. Il faut réagir. Il faut recultiver en nous les qualités supérieures de l'âme. Il faut redevenier mystiques. Il faut rapprendre l'amour, source de toute comprehension

[135] A. Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture," in *Œuvres*, 207. "…à l'animalité pure et simple."

[136] Jules Christophe, "Notices sur Georges Seurat (le peintre)," *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui* 8, 368 (April 1890), 4. "C'est logique, trop peut-être."

another critic described the various incarnations of artistic personality, emphasizing a new one based on science:

> Now that the procedures, which used to be instinctive, have become scientific, and the methods of investigation have been made rigorous, and the technique of the arts, excluding all complicity with chance, requires assiduous labor and constant intellectual concentration, a change has taken place quite naturally in the personality of the artists, we mean to speak above all of French artists. The precision of the plastic expression has determined, it seems, a correction of personality.[137]

Later in the same article, the author reveals that it is Seurat who embodies this new kind of artist, and who represents the transgression from instinct toward science, the abandonment of chance and spontaneity for what is "rigorous," "assiduous," and "intellectual."[138] Albert Michel questioned whether the term neo-impressionism was even appropriate to the uninspired methods of Seurat:

> …the term is entirely inaccurate and only creates a false idea. There is, in reality, no school that takes impression, in the sense of the unexpected into account. Nothing is left to chance, to imagination, to inspiration; instead, everything is calculated to achieve a mathematically certain result.[139]

Pointillism was not a way of seeing; on the contrary, it was a system of painting that eclipsed the need for vision whatsoever. One commentator noted that Seurat's paintings

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[137] Anonymous, "Types d'artistes," *L'art moderne* 10, 9 (March 2, 1890), 66. "Depuis que les procédés, d'instinctifs qu'ils étaient naguère, sont devenus scientifiques, que les méthodes d'investigation se sont faites rigoureuses, que la technique des arts, excluant toute complicité du hasard, exige un labeur assidu et une constante concentration de pensée, un changement s'est produit, tout naturellement, dans la personnalité des artistes, nous entendons parler surtout des artistes français. La précision de l'expression plastique a déterminé, semble-t-il, la correction de l'individualité."

[138] Ibid.

[139] Albert Michel, "Le néo-impressionnisme," 84. "Appliqué à cette école, le terme de néo-impressioniste est tout à fait inexact et ne peut qu'en donner une idée très fausse. Il n'y a pas, en réalité, d'école où l'on fasse moins la part de l'impression, c'est-a-dire de l'imprévu. Rien n'y est laissé au hazard, à la fantaisie, à l'inspiration; tout, au contraire, y est calculé pour aboutir à un résultat mathématiquement certaine. Et c'est la ce qui différencie le néo-impressionisme de l'impressionnisme tout court, à un point tel qu'ils sont aux antipodes l'un de l'autre." Norma Broude, *Seurat In Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, 1978), 45. Michel misunderstood Fénéon's term; the critic would actually agree that Seurat's work was anti-impressionist in conception and handling. He wouldn't agree that Seurat's work left nothing to imagination though. He also felt that the artist's results, while affected by science, were not beholden to it.

"give an exact idea of the degree of aberration that can be obtained by … negating everything that exists and creating a new formula."[140] Most felt that Seurat's "abstract" technique — intellectually aloof and emotionally detached — came at an unjustifiable cost. For Thadée Natanson, Seurat's commitment to his theory eliminated imagination itself:

> The new method, conscious of what it abandons, renounces all the agreement that chance supplies, all the happiness of a smear, that an accidental touch encounters: it doesn't want to become anything except the rigorous application of principles where its faith resides … all those who work in this technique know the price of such a sacrifice … fantasy is banished like a memory.[141]

Many shared the view that Seurat's theoretical approach was anathema to expressive art. Hennequin said that Seurat's adherence to scientific "formulas" rendered his work "lifeless."[142] Huysmans: "too much procedure…not enough life."[143] De Wyzewa went even further, claiming that the work of Seurat and his group was insincere, stemming from a cold and calculating mind, and utterly disconnected from the *true* spirit of art.[144]

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[140] Champal [Achille Chainaye], reprinted in "Documents à Conserver, Le Carnaval d'un ci-devant: A propose du Salon de XX," *L'art moderne* (Feb. 18, 1891), 55. "Le Chahut, mieux encoure que la Grande Jatte, d'hilarante mémoire, vous donnera une idée exacte du degré d'aberration que l'on peut atteindre dans la pratique de cette doctrine abracadabrante qui consiste à nier tout ce qui existe et à créer une formule nouvelle quand même."

[141] Thadée Natanson, "Un Primitif d'aujourd'hui: Georges Seurat," *La revue blanche* 21, 165 (April 15, 1900), 613. "La méthode nouvelle, consciente de ce qu'elle abandonne, renonce à tout l'agrément que fournit le hazard, à tous les bonherus qu'un frottis, qu'une touche accidentelle rencontre: elle ne veut devoir rien qu'à l'application rigoureuse des principes ou sa foi reside…tous ceux qui travaillent savent le prix d'un tel sacrifice…La fantaisie est bannie comme les souvenirs."

[142] É. Hennequin, "Notes d'art: exposition des artistes indépendants," 581-82. "des théories préalables…par l'absence encore de vie…"

[143] J.K. Huysmans, "Chronique d'art: Les indépendants," 55."J'ai décidément peur qu'il n'y ait trop de procédés, trop de systèmes, et pas assez de flamme qui pétille, pas assez de vie!"

[144] T. de Wyzewa, "Une Critique: L'art contemporain," 70. "Mais tandis qu'ils occupaient à cet amendement du langage, ils one négligé le but même de l'art, la reproduction sincère et complète de sensations vivants. Les œuvres de ces peintres – et MM. Pissarro, Seurat, sont les plus notoires – leurs œuvres nous intéressent comme les exercices de précieux virtuoses: la vie n'y est point, parce qu'ils ont négligé d'être sincères, trop séduits des formules extérieures." Compare with critics like Verhaeren, who wrote "I never doubted – not even for an instant – Seurat's sincerity…" É. Verhaeren, "Georges Seurat," 430**.** "Pas un instant je ne doutai de la sincérité entière et de la profonde innovation qui se prouvaient là, patentes, devant moi."

Looking at Seurat's paintings, one observer commented, was like watching a mathematician develop formulas: "To see him proceeding so slowly, from deduction to deduction, meticulous and infinitesimal, one would have thought him a geometrician. He held his soul like a bird palpitating in his hand, and permitted it neither flight nor the beating of its wings."[145] Pissarro too felt that Seurat was *capable* of emotion but deliberately held it back, "destroy[ing] his spontaneity with his cold and dull theory."[146] Renoir explained that theory killed the freedom in painting: "The truth is that in painting as in other arts, there is no method, no matter how little, that adapts to a formula… There is something extra in painting — the essential — that cannot be explained. You arrive in front of nature with theories and nature will throw them to the ground…"[147] His scorn for theory seems directed at what he would later call neo-impressionism's "blueprint" method. Jules Antoine complained, "An overly narrow technique certainly stiffens him and compromises the free flight of his temperament — the only really interesting thing in art."[148] Antoine thought that the formulas and color theories were so deadening that Seurat must have eventually hated himself for using them. He writes that Seurat, even by the end, was unable "to realize" because he was "still too trapped by the lead cover of theory."[149] To Antoine, it was inconceivable that Seurat was unaware of his failings.

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[145] Anonymous, "Ouverture du Salon des XX — L'Instaurateur du neo-impressionnisme, Georges-Pierre Seurat," *L'art moderne* 12, 6 (February 7, 1892), 42. "Et pourtant, à le voir procéder si lentement de déduction en déduction, méticuleux et infinitésimal, on eût dit un géomètre. Il tenait son âme comme un oiseau palpitant dans la main, et ne lui permettait ni le vol, ni les battements d'aile."

[146] Pissarro to Lucien 23 October 1895, in *Correspondance* 4:106. "…que Seurat qui, lui, avait du talent et de l'instinct avait tué sa spontanéité avec sa froide et embêtante théorie…"

[147] Renoir to Ambroise Vollard, *En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir*, 211-12**.** "La vérité est que, dans la peinture comme dans les autres arts, il n'y a pas un seul procédé, si petit soit-il, qui s'accommode d'être mis en formule…Il y a dans la peinture quelque chose de plus, qui ne s'explique pas, qui est l'essentiel. Vous arrivez devant la nature avec des théories, la nature flanque tout par terre…"

[148] J. Antoine, "Les peintres néo-impressionnistes," 525. "Mais, à coup sûr, une technique trop étroite le raidit, et compromet le libre essor de son tempérament – la seule chose réellement intéressant en art."

[149] J. Antoine, "Georges Seurat," *La revue indépendante* 19 (April, 1891), 93. "…mais il était encore trop enfermé dans la chape de plomb de la théorie pour avoir pu réaliser complètement ce qu'il sentait."

"Seurat died," he wrote, projecting his own beliefs, "with the regret of works dreamed but not made."[150]

One of the great ironies about Seurat's "scientific" approach to painting is that there is actually very little science within them. Even by the standards of the time, Seurat was hardly on the cutting edge of knowledge about the light spectrum or wavelength interactions, and many of his ideas that would eventually be derided as "scientific" sprang from a boyhood reading of Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867) in 1876-77. Blanc's Idealist philosophy forms a critical and underemphasized, but not particularly scientific, aspect of Seurat's approach. According to Blanc, great artists are capable of instinctively grasping the fundamental character or beauty of things that the rest of the world cannot see. To depict these essential things — or "ideas" — artists must learn not only to imitate but to invent, to make nature, in its weak, feminine, and fickle changeability, stronger and better through abstraction. Blanc condemned naturalists who tried to capture the landscape purely as it *was*, rather than as it should be, or could be, or might be. "The painter of style sees the great side, even in little things," he wrote. "The realist imitator sees the small side."[151] An artist like Seurat, who remakes the world around him into a synthetic or idealized version of reality, is aiding in the transition from everyday to eternal. By closing himself off from the fleeting minutiae of the world, the artist actually sets himself free. Seurat took this philosophy to heart, yet as scientific observation it hardly rises to the level of the "geometrician," let alone, "little young chemists."

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[150] J. Antoine, "ibid. "Seurat a dû mourir avec le regret de l'œuvre rêvée et non faite."

[151] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, "Le peintre de style voit le grand côte, même des petites choses, l'imitateur réaliste voit le petit côte, même des grandes."

Understanding neo-impressionism within this context also dramatically changes one's understanding of Seurat's approach to color. As the art historian Georges Roque has written, Seurat relied more on color *theory* than color *science*, the latter of which Roque describes as objective, precise, and formulaic, a set of arcane and testable facts about the literal behavior of light. Color *theory*, by contrast, is far more interpretive and loose, a set of notions, even preferences, about how colors appear together. Color theory, then, is little more than the collective vocabulary many of us share about pairings of color, and such elementary ideas as complementary contrasts; indeed, these notions are almost entirely devoid of any "science" at all.[152] Roque points out that Seurat's understanding of color was mostly limited to lay texts. For example, two of the primary sources for Seurat's color theory were Chevreul's *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (1839) and Ogden Rood's *Student's Textbook of Color*, or *Modern Chromatics, with Applications to Art and Industry*, (1879) both of which were written for the general public, and especially geared toward readers in the arts and industry. Despite the nineteenth-century perception of Seurat as an esoteric thinker about color, his understanding of color theory was actually quite banal. Blanc's work, for example — by far the most influential on Seurat — described color as "like music," which breathed emotion into a picture and revealed the "intimacy of being" that "agitates the heart."[153] Color, Blanc wrote, was "mobile, vague, intangible," but it could be grasped by accepting a few broad ideas, like the fact that colors opposite each other on the color wheel tend to highlight each other, and pure colors are more striking than mixed ones.[154] These were

[152] See Georges Roque, "Seurat and Color Theory," in *Seurat Re-viewed*, 44-46.

[153] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, 528-529. "…la couleur…se peut ensigner comme la musique…"; "Les coloris est donc le moyen d'expression par excellence, des qu'il faut peindre les sensations que nous procure la matière inorganique et les sentiments qui s'éveillent dans l'intimité de l'être."; "À ce trait vous reconnaissez déjà la puissance de la couleur, et que son rôle est de nous dire ce qui agite le cœur…"

[154] C. Blanc, *Grammaire,* 528. "…la couleur est un élément mobile, vague, insaisissable…"

hardly the writings of a spectrum analyst, yet in an 1890 letter to Fénéon, Seurat credited these simple observations as "the keystone of my technique."[155] And in an unsent letter to the journalist Maurice Beaubourg in 1890, he explained his "color theory" in similarly unscientific terms:

> Art is Harmony.
> Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of similarities of tone, of tint, of line taking in account of a dominant and under the influence of the lighting…
> Opposites are:
> For tone, a more luminous /lighter one for a darker one.
> For tint, the complementaries, that is, a certain red
> Opposed to its complementary, etc.
> Red – Green
> Orange – Blue
> Yellow –Violet…
> Melange optique: eye will perceive a new color, a "resultant color" by mixing two tones. Separate touches form more brilliant mixture of color in eye than palette.[156]

Yet to many of Seurat's contemporaries, what made Seurat's interest in color theory distressing was its uncomfortable similarity to the attitude of the photographer, with his chemical mixes and literal approach to representation. To say that photography represented a threat to many painters in the 1890s would be a gross understatement: for half a century, the emergence of photographic images had become a touchstone against which painters learned to redefine their work, their ideas, and even their understanding of themselves as artists.

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[155] See Robert L. Herbet et al., *Seurat* (New York, 1991) Appendix F, 383 for a reprint of the original letter (translated). Seurat feels the need to defend himself because of Fénéon's article "Signac," *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui* (1890), in which the critic failed to mention Seurat's progeny.

[156] Georges Seurat "Esthétique." "L'art c'est l'Harmonie. L'Harmonie c'est l'analogie des contraires, l'analogie des semblances, de ton, de teinte, de ligne, considérés par la dominante et sous l'influence d'un éclairage…Les contraires ce sont: Pour le ton, un plus lumineux/clair pour un plus somber. Pour la teinte, les complémentaires, c'est-à-dire un certain rouge opposé à sa complémentaire, etc. (rouge-vert; orange-bleu; jaune-violet)..." Quoted in H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, LXXII.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF CONTEXT

Since its invention in the 1830s, photography had ignited a vigorous debate among painters and critics over how the new medium should be understood. Here was a tool that represented the world with unbiased accuracy and in record time. Advocates praised its machine efficiency as a technological leap toward precision and even truth.[157] In William Henry Fox Talbot's 1839 "Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing," a paper explaining the new medium of photography to the Royal Society of London, the photographer/scientist explains:

> It is so natural to associate the idea of labour with great complexity and elaborate detail of execution…the object which would take the most skilful artist days or weeks of labour to trace or to copy, is effected by the boundless powers of natural chemistry in the space of a few seconds.[158]

The genius of photography, to these proponents, was precisely that it made the artist superfluous. In portraiture,

> the hand is liable to err from the true…and a very small deviation causes a notable diminution in the resemblance. I believe [the] manual process cannot be compared with the truth and fidelity with which the portrait is given by means of solar light.[159]

Photography, then, was nearly magic. Its images were immaculate, interchangeable with reality. Fox Talbot explained that a photograph of lace was mistaken for lace itself because of the "degree of accuracy with which…objects can be imitated" (Fig. 10).[160] In

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[157] Plenty of photographers, like Eastlake and Cameron, defended photography as artistic. Some nineteenth-century avante-garde artists, like Degas, also explored the artistic potential of the medium. It has been suggested that Cézanne (and maybe Corot before him) incorporated the blur of the camera into their images to connote active sensation.

[158] Talbot, Beaumount Newhall, ed. *Photograpy: Essays and Images* (New York/London: 1980-81), 23-31.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid.

addition to its accuracy, photography was transparent, without the distorting interference of "the artist's pencil."[161]

Yet artists and critics, predictably, were rather less enthusiastic. Photographs, they argued, were accurate but soulless. Without the mediating eye of the painter, they were unable to assign value or understanding. Charles Blanc, Seurat's guide on many aesthetic issues, held firm to his belief that photography should be limited to the reproduction of still objects, not the complexity of the human form, whose subtleties required an artist to grasp: "Whatever thinks and lives can only be seen by a being that itself lives and thinks…The eye of photography, so clear-sighted in the material world, is blind when it regards the spiritual."[162] Critic Henri Delaborde agreed that using photography for the reproduction of non-living things was acceptable, but felt that overall photography was a "vulgar industry" that produced crisp details and gleaming surfaces in which "the hand, or rather the spirit, is absent."[163] Another critic, Francis Wey also wrote about the spiritual shortcoming of photography and scorned those naturalist painters who sought to reproduce the world with the sterility of a camera's eye: "The naturalists in art will design a school that proposes to stuff out living nature, to render her how she is, without interpreting her, and to limit their views to rival the daguerreotype."[164] While all of these critics agreed that photography was tolerable in its place, and even helpful for documentary purposes, as an artistic medium it left them cold.

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[161] Ibid.

[162] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, 630, 623. "…la representation vulgaire…" "…De là aussi les usurpations de la photographie, dont l'œil, si clairvoyant dans le monde de la matière, est aveugle quand le regarde le monde de l'esprit."

[163] Henri Delaborde, "La photographie et la gravure," *Revue des deux mondes* (April 1, 1856), 626. "On sent que la main, l'âme plutôt, est absente…"

[164] Francis Wey, "Du Naturalisme dans l'Art," *La Lumière* (1857), 34. "Les naturalistes de l'art désigneront-ils une école qui se propose d'empailler la nature toute vive, de la rendre comme elle est, sans l'interpréter, et de borner ses vues a rivaliser avec la daguerréotype…"

In Tahiti between 1896 and 1898, Gauguin scornfully described the rising popularity of photography as emblematic of the public's servile devotion to technology:

> The century is coming to an end and the masses press anxiously about the scientist's door; they whisper, they frown, faces brighten. "Is it all over?" "Yes." A few minutes later: "No, not yet." "What is happening?" "Is a virgin giving birth?" "Is a pope becoming truly Christian?" "Is a hanged man being resuscitated?" Not at all; quite simply it's the question of color photography, the absorbing problem whose solution is going to make so many unsavory characters fall down with their behinds right in their…At last we will know who is right, Cabanel, Claude Monet, Seurat, Chevreul, Rood, Charles Henry; the painters, the chemists….The photography of colors will tell us a truth. What truth? The real color of a sky, of a tree, of all of materialized nature. What then is the real color of a centaur, a minotaur, or of a chimera, of Venus or Jupiter?[165]

Gauguin jokes that color photography will reveal which chemist's or artist's interpretation of color comes closest to the "truth" of the camera, a truth incapable of making the leap from "materialized nature" to the great icons of imagination.[166] Gauguin noted:

> Do you know what will soon be the ultimate in truth? — photography, once it begins to reproduce colors, and that won't be long in coming. And yet you want an intelligent man to sweat for months so as to give the illusion he can do something as well as an ingenious little machine can![167]

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[165] Paul Gauguin, "Second séjour en Océanie," (1896-97) in *Oviri: Écrits d'un sauvage,* ed. Daniel Guérin (Paris, 1974), 173-174. "Le siècle va finir et la foule se présente inquiète aux portes du savant: on chuchote à l'oreille, des sourcils se froncent, des visages se déridents. Eh bien c'est-ce fini? Qui. Quelques minutes après: non, pas encore. De quoi s'agit-il donc; est-ce une pucelle qui accouche, un pape qui se fait vraiment chrétien ou un pendu qu'on ressuscite? Non pas; c'est tout simplement la photographie des couleurs, ce problème tant cherché dont la resolution va mettre tant de malpropres, le fessier dans leur… On saura enfin qui a raison, Cabanel, Claude Monet, Seurat, Chevreul, Rood, Charles Henry; les peintres, les chimistes….La photographie des couleurs va nous dire la vérité. Quelle vérité? la vrai couleur d'un ciel, d'un arbre, de toute la nature materialisée. Quelle est donc la vrai couleur d'un centaure, d'un minotaure, ou d'une chimère, de Venus et de Jupiter?" Translation from Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage* (Cambridge,1996), 140-141.

[166] Later, in 1910, Charles J. Holmes compared Seurat's 1886 *L'Hospice et Le Phare, Honfleur*, to color photography writing, "…When he succeeds…the result is a sort of color-photograph, when he fails his work has not even that modest virtue…" Holmes, *Notes on Post-Impressionist Painters* (London, 1910-11). Quoted in H. Dorra and J. Rewald, *Seurat*, 200.

[167] Interview with Gauguin by Eugène Tardieu, *L'Echo de Paris* (May 13, 1885). "Savez-vous ce qui sera le comble de la vérité bientôt? C'est la photographie quand elle rendra les couleurs, ce qui ne tardera pas.

According to Gauguin, the painter sweated for months, yet in the end produced paintings that were, at best, interchangeable with photography. The work, then, was wasted, since a photograph took only a fraction of the time to make.[168] He wrote:

> Machines have come, art has gone; and I am far from finding that photography is auspicious for us. Since the advent of the snapshot, said one horse lover, painters have been able to understand horses, and Meissonnier, one of the glories of France, has been able to depict that noble animal from all angles. As for myself, my art goes way back, further back than the horses on the Parthenon — all the way back to the dear old wooden horsey from my childhood.[169]

Like other artists, Gauguin reacted to the threat of photography by seeking to differentiate his work from the photographic image as clearly as possible, and in time, many would come to regard photography as a hidden treasure for painters. Though they continued to believe that it rendered certain kinds of painting redundant, many artists and critics also came to believe that the arrival of photography liberated painting to embrace its most interpretive aspects and abandon the shackles of literalism altogether. In the essay "Photography" from 1855, the Belgian Academic painter, Antoine Joseph Wiertz wrote:

Et vous voudriez qu'un homme intelligent suût pendant des mois pour donner l'illusion de faire aussi bien qu'une ingénieuse petite machine!"

[168] Gauguin relished in Theo van Gogh's description of neo-impressionism as "work." In an October letter of 1888 to Bernard he writes: "[Théo] van Gogh has written a very peculiar thing to Vincent. He says I was at Seurat's, who did some good studies, denoting a good workman happy over what he'd been doing. Signac as cold as ever: he seems to me like a salesman of little dots." See *The Writings of a Savage*, 24. "…[Théo] van Gogh a écrit à Vincent [van Gogh] une chose bien curieuse. J'ai été, dit-il, chez Seurat qui a fait des bonnes etudes dénotant un bon ouvrier aimant son morceau. Chez Signac toujours froid: il me paraît un voyager en petit points." Paul Gauguin, *Oviri*, 43. After Muybridge and Marey's chronophotographs particulated movement, Seurat continued to represent movement in a pre-chronophotographic way, proving that he was rejecting photographic literalness (e.g. see dog in *La Grande Jatte* and horse in *Le Cirque*). See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Boston, 2001), 277; and Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Works of Etienne Jules Marey* (Chicago, 1992), 272.

[169] "Les machines sont venues, l'art s'en est allé; et je suis loin de penser que la photographie nous soit propice. Depuis l'instantané, disait un amateur de cheval, le peintre a compris cet animal et Meissonnier, cette gloire française, a pu donner toutes les attitudes de ce noble animal. Quant à moi je me suis reculé bien loin, plus loin que les chevaux du Parthénon…jusqu'au dada de mon enfance, le bon cheval de bois." Paul Gauguin, *Oviri,* 58. Translated in P. Gauguin, *Writings,* 127.

> A few years ago, a machine was born which is the honour of our time…A century from now this machine will be the brush, palette, colours, skills, rules, patience, eye, style, brushwork, paste, glaze, tricks of the trade, modeling, finish, and rendering. A century from now there will no longer be a mason in painting: there will only be architects, painters in all senses of the word. Let it not be thought that the daguerreotype kills art. No, it only kills the work of patience and pays homage to the work of thought.[170]

Photography offered a release to the painter: the freedom to characterize the world, and not merely imitate it. For an artist who simply wanted to reproduce reality, the photograph was a reason for "despair"; but for the true artist, the intellectual artist, photography was a "subject of joy."

Renoir shared this belief, stating that photography "freed painting from a lot of tiresome chores, starting with family portraits."[171] Yet Renoir also spoke for many artists who felt that Seurat's work neglected this freedom. It was too objective, too mechanical; when Renoir compared Seurat's work to a "blueprint" — an early photographic process that produced a print which was literally blue — his implication was unmistakable. Seurat was trying to reproduce the world, where the painter's task was to explain it, to interpret it, to guide the viewer's eye through it. To Renoir, Seurat was painting without feeling, like a machine; like a photograph. "It is not enough for a painter to be a clever craftsman; he must love to 'caress' his canvas, too," Renoir declared.[172]

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[170] Antoine Joseph Wiertz, "La Photographie," *Le National* (June, 1855), reprinted in Antoine Joseph Wiertz, *Œuvres littéraires* (Brussels, 1869), 309. "Il nous est né, depuis peu d'années, une machine, l'honneur de notre époque, qui chaque jour, étonne notre pensée et effraie nos yeux. Cette machine, avant un siècle, sera le pinceau, la palette, les couleurs, l'adresse, l'habitude, la patience, le coup-d'œil, la touche, la pâte, le glacis, la *ficelle*, le modelé, le fini, le rendu. Avant un siècle, il n'y aura plus de maçons en peinture: il n'y aura plus que des architectes, des peintres dans toute l'acception du mot. Qu'on ne pense pas que la daguerreotype tue l'art. Non, il tue l'œuvre de la patience, il rend hommage à l'œuvre de la pensée." Translated in *Art in Theory, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Oxford, 2001), 654-655.

[171] Jean Renoir, *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, mon père* (Paris, 1981), 191, "libéré la peinture d'un tas de besognes assommantes, à commencer par le portrait de famille."

[172] Renoir to Ambroise Vollard in *Ambroise Vollard: En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir*, 322.

Gauguin also believed that Seurat's approach to painting, with its emphasis on science and color theory, would inevitably "end in color photography." By failing to embrace the subjective and personal aspects of painting, he invited his work to compete with the photograph — a contest the painter could never win.

For Gauguin, the Neo-Impressionist's aim to capture color and light in the most literal way was akin to the objectivity of the photograph. If Seurat's main goal was to "represent color and light as truthfully as possible," then his work was no different from the mechanism of the camera.[173] Yet a painter could never hope to represent the detail and color of the world with the speed and accuracy of the lens. If he tried, he would quickly "fall down," outpaced by a more competent science.[174]

Gauguin contrasted his instinctual understanding of color — "it is very vagabond, very elastic, it depends on the mood in which I wake up in the morning" — to the rigid and unfeeling color of Seurat, who was directed by a slavish mimicry of the real world.[175] An artist like Seurat, Gauguin wrote, "peers through his opera glasses at the right color and dexterously applies to the canvas… This whole heap of accurate colors is lifeless, frozen."[176] For Gauguin, the creep of technology was terrifying, and Seurat was perhaps uniquely emblematic of the disastrous turn away from the personal toward a reckless embrace of science and technology.

Renoir shared Gauguin's fear that painting would have to define itself as separate from photography in order to survive:

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[173] P. Signac, *D'Eugene Delacroix*, 260, 263.

[174] P. Gauguin, *Oviri*, 173-174. "Non pas; c'est tout simplement la photographie des couleurs, ce problème tant cherché dont la resolution va mettre tant de malpropres, le fessier dans leur…"

[175] "Ou plutôt, j'en ai une, mais très vagabonde, très élastique, selon les dispositions où je me lève le matin…" Paul Gauguin, *Oviri,* 174.

[176] "Et chacun, la lorgnette à la main, examine le ton juste, et avec dextérité appliqué sur la toile, dans des casiers préparés à l'avance….Tout cet amas de couleurs justes est sans vie, glacé…" P. Gauguin, *Oviri*, 176.

> All those young girls who do mawkish water colors at least get a vague idea of what painting is. To appreciate Mozart it is good to know how to play the piano. To appreciate father Corot, it's a help to try your hand at a few landscapes. Photography is going to kill the amateur painter, and indirectly the art lover; and it may even kill the painter since the art lover is his source of livelihood.[177]

In the age of photography, the amateur painter, who only wanted to reproduce reality, would abandon the canvas entirely and turn instead to the easy, accurate, and quick technology of the lens. This seemingly innocuous shift was insidious, because a public unfamiliar with the nature of painting would be unprepared to appreciate its wonders. Little by little the audience would dwindle, lost in numbness and indifference, the distraction of a new and toy-like medium.

Baudelaire had similar worries years earlier. In his 1859 review of the Salon, he wrote that photography, still a fledgling medium, already put painting in danger because the public would be lured by the mimetic quality of the image, just as they were lured by the crisp neatness of Academic paintings. Baudelaire saw the camera as a tool of emotionless accuracy, precisely like those paintings he described as having "skill without soul."[178] In a society bombarded by perfect camera likenesses, the expressive painter would be squeezed; in a society that celebrated the exactitude of the photo, a painter's expressive role would become marginal, perhaps disappear altogether. With time, the public would insist that painters provide the same realism as the camera. "Each day art further diminishes its self respect by bowing down before external reality; each day the

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[177] Jean Renoir*, Renoir, my Father* (2001)167-168. Jean Renoir, *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, mon père* (Gallimard, 1981), 191. "Tous ces jeunes filles qui peignent des aquarelles à pleurer de bêtise acquièrent cependant une vague idée de ce qu'est la peinture. Pour apprécier Mozart, it est bon de jouer un peu de piano. Pour apprécier le père Corot, ça aide d'avoir taté soi-même du paysage. La photographie va tuer le peintre amateur, et par contrecoup, l'amateur tout court, et peut-être même elle tuera le peintre puisque celui-ci vit de l'amateur."

[178] To Baudelaire the Academic Constant Troyon was the perfect example of an artist who painted with "skill but without soul." C. Baudelaire, "Salon de 1859," in *Œuvres*, 662. "M. Tryon est le plus bel exemple de l'habileté sans âme."

painter seems more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees."[179] Seurat, in this view, was part of the shift toward the death of painting. Lacking the flourish and impulsive marks of the true artist, his work was mere "blueprints," "color photographs." The artist himself was little more than a machine.

If painters felt threatened by the rise of photography during the late 1800s, their apprehensions mirrored a larger mood throughout society. From the outset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s, when the first spinning and weaving machines began to replace the human hand, society at large — and especially the working class — found reason to fear the dawn of the machine age. In England, where many of the inventions of the Industrial Revolution originated, these social tensions were impossible to miss: from the Luddite strikes between 1811 and 1817 to the Swing Riots in 1830, the terror sparked by the arriving machines was pervasive throughout the working class. Elsewhere, the same fears echoed in the widespread machine-breaking riots in France between 1779-90; with the publication of Marx's *Das Kapital*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and Émile Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society*; and in the anti-machine aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Fears of a world dominated by machines were, in fact, one of the defining social characteristics of the Industrial Revolution, an era that inspired not only a technological transformation, but a commensurate transformation in society's view of that technology.[180]

It is difficult to overstate the ruthlessness of technology's advance between the mid-1700s and the late 1800s, from John Kay's Flying Shuttle (1733) to James Watt's

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[179] C. Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography" from "Salon of 1859," in *Œuvres*, 619. "De jour en jour l'art diminue le respect de lui-même, se prosterne devant la réalité extérieure, et le peintre devient de plus en plus enclin à peindre, non pas ce qu'il rêve, mais ce qu'il voit."

[180] See Herbert L. Sussmann, *Victorians and the Machine* (Cambridge, 1968), vii.

Steam Engine (1775); from the first steam powered mills (1779) to Edmund Cartwright's Powerloom (1784); from the Bessemer steel process (1856) to Henry Clayton's brick-making machine (1900), an onslaught of machines that gained speed and momentum virtually without pause.

In France, the arrival of these technologies followed a different course than other countries, and had a distinct cultural impact. Unlike England, where many of the technological advances originated, France did not embrace the new machines right away. While England incorporated dozens of advances slowly, piecemeal, between the 1700s and the 1850s, in France those years were preoccupied with war, and with a deep and abiding economic slump. As a result, many of the most transformative developments of the Industrial Revolution would not arrive in France until the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon in the 1850s, and then they would arrive all at once. In some ways, this made the process of industrialization all the more shocking to the French working class. What had been constant but gradual in England exploded on the French. In the span of a single decade, half a century of technology reorganized society from the bottom up. Adding to the indignity of high unemployment, the machines had been designed in *England* of all places. Just decades after overthrowing their own monarchy, the French were not unaware that their lives were being dramatically uprooted by the machinery of a monarchical, rival power. For decades, French society had resisted the innovations of modernity in more simple respects, using wood instead of coal to heat, and relying on the hand rather than the machine in many crafts. The sudden erasure of so many customs by the dawn of a new machine era was nothing short of traumatic.[181]

[181] Arthur Louis Dunham, *The Industrial Revolution in France, 1815-1848* (New York, 1955).

In Paris, under the direction of Louis Napoleon's II Republic (1848-1870), Baron Haussmann had reconceived the city altogether, gridding the landscape with broad, straight avenues and homogenizing buildings. One day, people said ruefully, even the Seine might be straightened.[182] What came to be known as "Haussmannization" was, for many French, deeply unnerving. Something about the city felt broken, missing, stripped of its life by the machinery of "progress." Into this dead zone, the masses of rural France poured, drawn away from pastoral lives to serve as the laborers, machinists, and factory workers in a grim and remorseless new world. As the art historian T.J. Clark writes, the new city felt to many "simply as an image."[183] The idiosyncratic, worn-in, and livable old Paris was replaced by a grand, overwhelming spectacle. An old man in Victorien Sardou's 1866 comedy, *Maison neuve*, struck by the repetitive lack of variation in the modern city, noted: "A tree, a bench, a kiosk! … A tree, a bench, a kiosk! … A tree, a bench…"[184] The writer Charles Yriarte sadly commented: "The straight line has killed the picturesque, the unexpected."[185] As Rousseau had predicted, as de Tocqueville had warned, the mechanical regularity of industrialization was insidiously transforming the very nature of man. The lament was echoed everywhere: in the writings of Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Edmond and Jules de Goncourts, Baudelaire, Zola, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Huysmans. Hugo, responding to changes in the 1830s, compared Paris, metaphorically, to a checkerboard. The Goncourts noted in a journal entry from 1860:

> My Paris, the Paris where I was born, the Paris of the way of life of 1830 to 1848, is passing away… I am a stranger to what is coming, to what is, as I am to these

[182] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (New Jersey, 1984), 35.
[183] T.J. Clark, *Modern Life*, 36.
[184] Victorien Sardou, *Maison neuve*, in *Théâtre complet de Victorien Sardou*, 9: 274-75.
[185] Charles Yriarte, "Les Types parisiens – les clubs," *Paris-Guide* 2 (1867), 929. "La ligne droite a tué le pittoresque et l'imprévu."

> new boulevards, without turnings, without chance perspectives, implacable in their straight lines, which no longer smack of the world of Balzac, which make one think of some American Babylon of the future.[186]

In a poem dedicated to Hugo, "Le Cigne," Baudelaire mourned the physical destruction of Old Paris:

> as I cross the new Place du Carrousel. *Old* Paris is gone (no human heart changes half so fast as a city's face)[. . .] Paris changes…But in sadness like mine nothing stirs — new buildings, old neighborhoods turn to allegory, and memories weigh more than stone.[187]

For Renoir, the march of progress was deeply personal: as a child, his family had been forced from their Paris home so that Haussmann could reimagine their neighborhood. Renoir described the new buildings as "cold and lined up like soldiers on parade."[188] (A similar sentiment courses through criticism on Seurat; as noted earlier, Seurat's figures from *La Grande Jatte* were compared to "toy soliders," denoting a sense of unease and anxiety.) Like many French, Renoir's family saw its trades and talents become virtually extinct in the span of a generation: his father a tailor, his mother a dressmaker, his grandfather a cobbler.[189] Renoir himself was only seventeen when he lost his job hand-

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[186] Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Nov. 18, 1860, in *Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, (Paris, 1891-1911) 1:345-46: "Mon Paris, le Paris où je suis né, le Paris des mœurs de 1830 à 1848, s'en va…Je suis étranger à ce qui vient, à ce qui est, comme à ces boulevards nouveaux sans tournant, sans aventures de perspective, implacables de ligne droite, qui ne sentent plus le monde de Balzac, qui font penser à quelque Babylone américaine de l'avenir."

[187] Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cigne," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, translation Richard Howard (United States of America, 2003) 90-91. "Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel. Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville Change plus vite, hélas! Que le cœur d'un mortel)…Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégroie."

[188] Quoted in Robert Herbert, *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts* (New Haven – London, 2000), 3.

[189] It was industrial progress that, in 1858, made him leave his first job painting porcelain as the process of mechanically stamping designs on faïence ceramics had just been mastered and came as, Renoir wrote, "the death knell of a splendid craft" of hand painting. Renoir tried to wage a "battle of speed" against the machine, as his son Jean retold: "He was determined to beat progress at its own game and prove that the hand of a Parisian artisan was as good as shining wheels and well-greased piston rods." Despite undercutting the price of mass-produced ceramics, dealers actually preferred the regularity and exactness of the mass-produced – this taste for the machine's regular perfection was Baudelaire's nightmare coming true. And Renoir's too: "I was beaten from the start by this insane passion for monotony so strong in our day." See J. Renoir, *Renoir, my Father*, 67-68.

painting ceramics. In 1884, he wrote a manifesto to establish the "Society of Irregularists," which would unite all arts together in nature and against the mechanical tides of the modern world.[190] Other French artists, like Millet, Delacroix, Monet, van Gogh, and Gauguin, chastised the rise of technology with equal fervor. Millet, a native of Cherbourg, wrote that his experiences living in the "black, muddy, smoky Paris… seemed to choke my head and heart, and almost suffocated me. I was seized with an uncontrollable fit of sobbing" and in 1849 he abandoned the city, where he had lived since 1837, for Barbizon, where he remained for the rest of his life.[191] The Barbizon paintings of Millet, Daubigny, and Rousseau were redolent with nostalgia for a pre-industrial past. In all of Millet's agricultural images he painted farmers in a pre-industrial era, ignoring the widespread signs of industry around him, and depicting instead pre-industrial tools like the old-fashioned plow and scythe. Delacroix dreaded the modernization of agriculture, as well. Like Rousseau and de Tocqueville, Delacroix felt that mechanization disoriented natural rhythms, alienating workers from their sense of place and self. Like the Barbizon painters, Monet too sought refuge in the countryside. While many of his early paintings document industrialization, the factory towers and smoke disappear from his work suddenly in 1877, after seven large paintings of locomotives in Paris' Gare Saint Lazare.[192] Gone are the railroad bridges and trains; in their place, natural, unpeopled landscapes. Though a train ran through Monet's property in Giverny, he did not in thirty years paint it.

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[190] Renoir felt that the Independants were too inclusive – it admitted anyone – at the same time it was not inclusive enough: only admitted painters, printmakers, and sculptors.
[191] From Millet's autobiography cited in Alfred Sensier, *La Vie et l'oeuuvre de J.-F. Millet* (Paris, 1881), 44. "Et Paris, noir, boueux, enfumé…l'air de Paris, me portèrent à la tête et au coeur, au point de me suffoquer. Je fus pris par une crise de sanglots que je ne pouvais arrêter."
[192] Robert Herbert, *From Millet to Léger* (New Haven – London, 2002), 18.

Van Gogh also grew weary of the industrializing city. In 1888, he left Paris for the south of France, driven by a need to escape the "decadence of the city."[193] In letters to his brother, Theo, and Gauguin, he described Paris as emotionally and physically draining. Like so many other painters of the era, van Gogh's vision of the countryside was discriminating: he prioritized the representation of the agricultural landscape and manual workers over any signs of industry. In the south (at least in his imagination), van Gogh was moving back in time to a world unregulated by the machine, factory, and clock.[194]

Gauguin's travels — first to Brittany, then Martinique, and finally to Tahiti — are a testament to his search for an escape from what he perceived as the corruption of the modern, industrialized world. Brittany, celebrated as the "pure" France, had a history of remaining beyond the touch of modernization, with one of the lowest literacy rates and a deeply religious, traditionalist culture. Gauguin presented Brittany as a lost paradise, unchanged and untouched. His vision was selective — like Millet, Monet, and van Gogh, he chose to overlook the signs of modernization in his work.[195] In Tahiti, Gauguin sought a kind of opposite to the industrial society of France. He wrote extensively about his preference for "clumsy" tools and handmade "primitive" objects.

By the time Seurat's paintings appeared on the French landscape, there was nothing harmless in questions like, "Is it done mechanically?" The references to machinery that laced so much of the criticism around his work — words like cold, severe, impersonal, logical, uniform, obstinate, systematic, monotonous, inanimate, lusterless,

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[193] Vincent van Gogh, *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à son frère Théo* (Paris, 1960), letter 595.

[194] This ideal is, of course, also a myth as the pre-industrial era had its own share of problems – work was backbreaking and monotonous, hours were long, wages low, poverty high, etc.

[195] By the mid-nineteenth century there was a burgeoning fishing industry. Bernard, Riviere, Seguin, and Beltrand were other artists who fictionalized Brittany.

immobilized, automatic — were both loaded and unmistakable to a nineteenth-century audience. Seurat wasn't fulfilling the proper, expressive role of the painter. He was simply building images from dots — repetitious dots, monotonous dots, dots that mimicked the tedious work of the factory. As critic Charles Morice phrased it, his work was "art reduced to technique … a kind of new and useless science [with] the hands in charge of the head."[196] These were disconnected hands, hands automatic and rote, with no revealing trace of originality in their monotonous marks. Seurat's figures, his critics said, had the "stiffness of automatons." They were "wooden. . . like toy soldiers," with "no thought, no soul, nothing." Nothing more than "mannequins" moving with "mechanical gestures." To these critics, Seurat's paintings forebode the triumph of machines, the usurpation of art itself.

But this view of Seurat was about to change.

[196] Quoted in R. Shiff, "Puppet and Test Pattern," 343.

Chapter Two: Volte Face

THE EMBRACE OF THE MECHANICAL

Societal values usually form like glaciers, slowly building upon themselves, but at times they can be disrupted suddenly, fissures thrusting into the ice and bursting onto the landscape in a bright volcanic current. This is what happened in early sixteenth-century Europe, when centuries of mythology about the German forests were transformed almost overnight. For some 300 years, most Europeans shared a view of the forests as the embodiment of the primitive — brutish, savage places, the antithesis of civilized Christianity. Engravings showed the forest dwellers as wild men, hairy, more animal than human, engaging in beastly acts like eating children, abducting women, and torturing animals. Even the forests themselves, as the home of this race, were widely feared as demonic wastelands where the finer impulse of humanity had not arrived. Yet the

rediscovery of an ancient text in 1455, and its widespread publication in 1500, would radically redefine this perception of the German forest, and recast its place in the popular mind. First published in 98 AD, *Germania* had originally been written as an ethnographic text by Tacitus; yet when it was republished by Conrad Celtis during the Renaissance, its portrayal of "wildness" as a virtue, the forest man as strong, free, healthy, and immune to the corruptions of the urbanite state, resonated broadly in Europe and transformed popular attitudes toward both rural people and the wilderness itself. Within a decade of *Germanica*'s publication, the signs of this transformation were unmistakable: across European society, artists and thinkers began to re-imagine life in the forest in an idyllic light. Theologians and geographers, painters and engravers, poets and orators all took part in fashioning a new identity for the rustic, from savage brute to noble savage, icons of moral virtue and national pride. The Black Forest, the Odenwald, and the Thuringer Wald were reconceived as places of restoration and purity, outside the grip of the decadence and decay in the Latinate south. Engravings like *Wild Man and Wild Woman* by Hans Leonhard Schaufelein depicted not hairy beasts in animalistic thrall, but gentle, hardworking, familial folk (Fig. 11).

In our own lives, we have seen an equally rapid change sweep across the modern landscape. Over the past four decades, the role of the feminine in American life has undergone a transformation more dramatic than ever before. The popular understanding of women's sexuality has been dramatically redefined in the space of a generation. For as long as historical records have existed, and across most of the world, in cultures as varied as the European Enlightenment and the remote African Ibo people, men and women have uniformly imagined the proper sexual behavior of women as one of chaste disinterest, suffused by a sense of deference and duty. In our own culture, influenced by puritan ideals, this emphasis on feminine naiveté has driven social attitudes about women's lives

since the first European settlements. Women were expected to demonstrate their purity of heart with a commensurate purity of body, a thorough abnegation of sexual instinct. Sex before marriage was not just taboo; in the dominant mores of the last two centuries, its consequence was ruinous. Even by the mid-twentieth century, an unmarried woman found to be pregnant could expect to be shunned by her peers, and if she were young enough, shipped off by her parents to another town to live with relatives in shame. Like Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, written a century earlier and set a century before that, women in mid-twentieth century America were widely discouraged from any show of sexuality. According to surveys from the 1950s, only 25% of Americans believed it was acceptable to have premarital sex, and although studies by the Kinsey Institute revealed these standards to be sharply at odds with how people really lived, the widespread societal value of sexual innocence shaped the expectations of women and the ways in which they viewed themselves.

Forty years later, by the time I was a teenager in the 1990s, these rules were almost entirely gone. Most teenage girls I knew felt perfectly comfortable experimenting sexually with their boyfriends, and the girl who remained chaste was regarded as something of a prude. The shift was quick, a result of converging influences from all corners of the social landscape. Popular academic texts, like the Kinsey Report and *Masters' and Johnson's Human Sexual Response* (1966) dramatically altered perceptions of sex; the development of The Pill in 1960, and a new image of feminine sexuality in magazines contributed to a changing norm across society. As the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s gained momentum, ideas about premarital sex transformed: centuries of conservative thinking disintegrated and many of the hidden behaviors revealed by Kinsey were no longer hidden or in need of hiding. Even today, social conservatives confirm the decline of these sexual mores by longing for their return.

From inside the nineteenth-century art world, it may have been difficult to imagine that the widespread fear of industrialization would be a short-lived feeling. The overwhelming hostility of writers and artists in the late 1800s to emerging technology must have seemed the only natural response of a humanist in an era of machines. With their clanking, heavy imposition on the finer impulses of civilization, their capacity to replace men at work, and their hulking presence on the landscape, machines made a natural enemy. For working people struggling to find jobs in a changing economy, the emerging era was nothing if not objectionable, and what clearly benefitted the titans of industry was not yet conceivable as a benefit to the common man. In his 1903, "Metropolis and Mental Life," the sociologist Georg Simmel described how the early years of mechanization seemed to encroach upon the individual soul: "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain an independence and individuality…. namely the resistance of the individual to being leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism."[197]

Yet within a decade, that sentiment was already on its way to historical oblivion. In 1914, the Futurist artist Umberto Boccioni spoke for an emerging consensus when he proclaimed, "the era of great mechanized individuals has begun and all the rest is Palaelontology."[198] While the examples of Simmel and Boccioni — one German, one Italian — by no means suggest a total reorientation of Europe, they touch upon a fundamental shift taking place in the perception of machines. Within only a few years, the fear and mistrust would be largely replaced by a more optimistic reverence for the

[197] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Simmel: On indivuality and social forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago, 1971), 324.
[198] Umberto Boccioni, "Futurist Painting and Sculpture" (1914), in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (London, 2009), 180.

new technological age.[199] Between Simmel and Boccioni, something had changed — but what?

Although the two seem close in time, in fact they straddle a critical shift: between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, the perception of machines radically altered. In the first, handloom weavers of Cambresis France had joined together to protest mechanized powerlooms; the industrial revolution a symbol of man's replacement by machines. In the latter, just twenty years after that protest, the pilot Louis Blériot became a hero for crossing the English Channel in a 25-horsepower propeller plane, his journey an emblem of the limitless heights to which man and machine, together, could soar. For artists and writers, Blériot became an icon of technology's promise. Guillaume Apollinaire marveled, "Just as Cimabue's pictures were paraded through the streets, our century has seen the triumphant parade of… the airplane of Blériot…."[200] The voyage was commemorated in paintings like Robert Delaunay's 1914 *Homage to Blériot* (Fig. 12). Delaunay called the pilot, "le grand Constructeur" — the great builder — not only because pilots had to assemble their crafts, but also, and more importantly, because Blériot's flight helped construct a new image of the world.[201] Many other artists welcomed the change: the painter Fernand Léger recalled Marcel Duchamp's state of wonder after they visited an airplane exhibition together, shortly before the onset of World War I: "Painting has come to an end. Who can do anything better than this propeller?"[202] In this new, twentieth-century world, pilots and racecar drivers became

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[199] F.T. Marinetti, *Geometric and Mechanical Slendour and the Numerical Sensibility* (1914) in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York, 1973), 155.
[200] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Peintres Cubistes* (Paris, 1913), 76. "Du même que l'on avait promené une œuvre de Cimabue, notre siècle a vu promener triomphalement pour être mené aux Arts-et-Métiers, l'aéroplane de Blériot…"
[201] Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New* (New York, 1982), 40.
[202] Quoted in K.G. Pontus Hultén, *The machine as seen as the end of the mechanical age* (New York, 1968), 140.

heroes of art and culture, discussed and praised and celebrated with parades, while nineteenth-century opponents of technology like Victor Hugo and the Goncourt brothers seemed increasingly reactionary.

Like the disgruntled handloom weavers, many twentieth-century workers would be replaced by machines, too, but they simultaneously began to experience a mitigating benefit: the appearance of personal technology that improved their lives. Innovations like the airplane and the automobile gave a dramatic new cast to the rise of machines, not as replacements for men, but as their chariots. Inventions like the vacuum cleaner offered a new vision of what it might mean to have human labor supplanted. And in time, the rush of technological innovation would also become so constant that it simply became normalized. In his 1909 *The Wonders of Modern Mechanism*, Charles Henry Cochrane showed how the pervasive growth of personal technology made its encroachments seem routine — even natural:

> The number and value of inventions have increased so rapidly of recent years that the public has come to accept the most marvelous innovations with a readiness that soon makes them an old story. While there are thousands of people alive to-day who remember the first railroad, the first steamboat, and the first telegraph, we have among us a younger generation who never knew what it was to be without the electric light, the telephone, the electric railway, or the mammoth daily newspaper. The generation that is to come will live in an age of new wonders and surrounded by new creature conveniences…[203]

In the nineteenth century, the breach of machines into daily life had seemed sudden and unsettling, a painful reminder of a world in flux; yet by the early twentieth century, laments of technology began to seem quaint.[204] "Modern society is racked without end by a nervous irritability," Émile Zola wrote in 1890. "We are sick and tired of progress,

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[203] Charles Henry Cochrane, *The Wonders of Modern Mechanism* (Philadelphia, 1896), 8.
[204] See Robert Herbert, *From Millet to Léger* (New Haven – London, 2002), 154-155.

industry, and science."[205] By 1910, such comments had drifted from the mainstream to the periphery.

In fact, by 1910, personal machines were everywhere and impossible to avoid. Bicycles, automobiles, typewriters, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, radios, and tractors were just a few among many of the new inventions that made personal encounters with technology inevitable.[206] By 1914, France had one of the most dense and popular railway systems in the world, reaching across 35,000 miles. "The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of life," the artist Francis Picabia observed in 1915. "It really is a part of human life… perhaps the very soul."[207]

The benefits of industrialization were becoming manifest across all strata of society. In agriculture, the introduction of the tractor and combine led to an increase in crop productivity, which contributed to a dramatically expanded food market and a commensurate decline in hunger. Although farm machinery had reduced the need for rural labor, urban centers and outposts were flooded with a new demand for factory workers; even as machines replaced men in the fields, they also provided food for those men, who often found work in factories building the machines themselves.

The shift away from agricultural life also made industrial growth more palatable to a younger generation, raised in the city and disinclined to long for a rural past. The nostalgia of writers like Hugo and painters like Millet lost purchase on the imaginations of a new generation, for whom an agrarian life had never existed – with suburbs around

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[205] Émile Zola, quoted in "Souvenirs des Goncourts," *La Revue encyclopédique*, 153 (August 8, 1896), 552. "…notre société qu'un éréthisme nerveux secoue sans cesse. Nous sommes malades de progrés d'industrie, de science…"

[206] See R. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger*, 155.

[207] Francis Picabia, "French Artists Spur on American Art," *New York Tribune* (October 24, 1915), pt. iv, 2.

cities, you didn't "see" the country. As the earthquake of the industrial revolution passed, its aftershocks faded, and the transformed landscape began to feel safe again.

The life-altering benefits of innovations like the automobile were difficult even for critics to deny. In 1909, Henry Ford announced proudly, "The price of the Model T will be so low… that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one."[208] This would not seem like hyperbole for long. In 1914, assembly line workers in the United States could buy a Model T Ford with just four months' pay. Across Europe, an explosion of auto mania swept the continent. In Paris, 3,000 people owned cars in 1900; by 1914, the number had soared to 100,000. During the same period, France became the biggest exporter of cars in the world, a source of revenue that found its way into all aspects of civic life.[209] In 1906, the newly-minted French company Michelin began to sell road maps to tourists, signaling the start of a new era of car transport and an increase in leisure time that would become a hallmark of industry's glow. To many the speed and excitement of the car embodied personal freedom – as K.G. Pontus Hultén noted in the catalog for the Museum of Modern Art's 1968 exhibition on the machine: "The automobile represented the ultimate liberty of the individual who, at the wheel of his monster-car, could be a kind of heroic figure: a modern centaur, he was one with his machine, enjoying sensations that no mortal had ever experienced before."[210]

With economic markets burgeoning, there was an increase in wealth, jobs, and quality of life. The rigidity of social strata began to thaw with the rise of a solid, stable, and successful middle class, and people in all sectors of society enjoyed new benefits of the machine. Innovations like the electric range joined the vacuum cleaner in thousands

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[208] Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (New York, 1922), 73.
[209] Colin Heywood, *The development of the French economy*, *1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1995), 48.
[210] K.G. Pontus Hultén, *The machine as seen as the end of the mechanical age*, 57.

of homes, replacing untold hours of drudgery at the wood stove and quickly becoming necessities.[211] Historian Siegfried Giedion explained how, between 1918 and 1939:

> …at one sweep, mechanization penetrates the intimate spheres of life. What the preceding century and a half had initiated, and especially what had been germinating from mid-nineteenth century on, suddenly ripens and meets life with full impact.[212]

During the same period, termed "full mechanization" by Giedion, more machines were introduced into the home than had been introduced the preceding century — indeed, ever before.[213] Machines did not just save time; they provided new entertainments, like radio and cinema, that changed the fabric of daily life. French cultural critic Paul Valéry marveled in 1928: "Just as water, gas, and electric are brought into our houses from far off… so we shall be supplied with visual and auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."[214] Though it is difficult to imagine from the modern vantage, when the appearance of stunning new technology is constant, these changes were as unfathomable as they were unprecedented, wholly distinct from anything before; they transformed the experience of living.[215] As Walter Benjamin observed in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" the nineteenth-century's preoccupation with whether or not photography was truly art soon

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[211] See C. Cochrane, *The Wonders of Modern Mechanism*, preface, vi.
[212] Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York, 1955), 41.
[213] S. Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command,* 42.
[214] Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity," in *Aesthetics*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1964), 225.
[215] In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues that the process of mechanization robs art of its "aura." Part of a works' "aura" is its origin in a far-off place unknown to the viewer, a place and time only inhabited by that piece – a place that makes the work singular. This distance of origin surrounds works with magic and wonder. Mechanical reproductions, which makes multiples of an original, strips works of their uniqueness, robbing them of aura. This disintegration of aura eliminates distance. Ironically, this elimination of distance doesn't make people feel more connected but less. With its magic gone, the work enters into a steady stream of multiples, becoming just another image. It is no longer special, no longer unique. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), 217-251.

was beside the point; the more salient question was how photography *changed* art, and perception itself.[216] As new modes of visualization appeared in the early twentieth century, they illuminated the boundaries of natural sight. X-rays and chronophotographs pointed out the limits of vision; the experience of riding in an automobile compressed space and made the world seem a blur; the presence of the airplane shrank the earth; and the movie sped up time. Art critic Léon Rosenthal explained in 1912, "Everything renews itself around us: wireless telegraphy, aviation, X-rays overturn all established notions. Scientific fervor devours us; photography, the development of artificial light have modified the very conditions of our vision."[217] In 1905, Gustave Le Bon went so far as to suggest that matter itself might be ephemeral; his theory of universal radioactivity proposed that all matter was radioactive and therefore deteriorating, conjuring images of a dematerialized world in which everything was temporary.[218]

While the machine had been ignored or reviled in much of nineteenth-century art, in the twentieth century art movements sprang up to embrace the machine as a symbol of thriving modernity. From Italian Futurism to British Vorticism to Russian Cubo-Futurism to American Precisionism, these movements celebrated a technological future. Ezra Pound noted in his 1915 "Affirmations" that attraction to machines was fundamental to the modern spirit:

> …a feeling for…machines… [is] one of the age-tendencies, springing up naturally in many places and coming into the arts quite naturally and spontaneously… This enjoyment of machines is just as natural and just as

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[216] Ibid., 227.

[217] Léon Rosenthal, "Les Salons de 1912," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 4, 7 (1912), 349. "Tout se renouvelle autour de nous: la télégraphie sans fil, l'aviation, les rayons X, bouleversent toutes les notions établies. L'ardeur scientifique nous dévore; la photographie, le développement des éclairages artificiels ont modifié les conditions mêmes de notre vision."

[218] See Linda Henderson*, Duchamp in Context* (Princeton, 1988), 7-9.

> significant a phase of this age as was the Renaissance "enjoyment of nature for its own sake", and not merely as an illustration of dogmatic ideas. [219]

In *Technics and Civilization* (1934), Lewis Mumford argued that the sudden openness to technology in art was a sign that the machine had been accepted, and the nineteenth-century's battle with the industry was finally over. "The passage of the machine into art was in itself a signal of release," Mumford writes, "a sign that the hard necessities of practice, the preoccupation with the immediate battle was over — a sign that the mind was free once more to see, to contemplate, and so to enlarge and deepen all the practical benefits of the machine."[220]

This is not to suggest that all artists were in perfect harmony as they welcomed machines in the early twentieth century. Even among those who embraced technology, the reasons and conditions varied widely. Among the Futurists and Cubo-Futurists, the machine was romantically idealized as a societal panacea. To the Vorticists, the hard-edged geometry of the machine offered philosophic lessons on how to live a detached life. The Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus movement welcomed the machine's ability to compel art toward practical and functional form. To the Hungarian designer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg, technology became a tool for social liberation, while to the Purists and Léger, its pure and geometric forms brought artists closer to the Platonic ideal. The flurry of artistic texts on the machine — Severini's "Machinery" (1922), Nikolia Tarabukin "From Easel to Machine" (1923),

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[219] Ezra Pound, "Affirmations," *The New Age* (February 11, 1915), 411.

[220] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York 1963), 330. Mumford explains the nineteenth- vs. the twentieth-century view of machine as follows: "While these new qualities [machine qualities] existed as facts of mechanical industry, they were not generally recognized as values until they were interpreted by the painter and the sculptor; and so they existed in an indifferent anonymity for more than a century. The new forms were sometimes appreciated, perhaps, as symbols of Progress: but art, as such, is valued for what it is, not for what it indicates, and the sort of attention needed for the appreciation of art was largely lacking in the industrial environment of the nineteenth century, and except for the work of an occasional engineer of great talent, like Eiffel, was looked upon with deep suspicion…" See L. Mumford, *Technics*, 334-336.

Léger's "The Machine Aesthetic" (1924), Kurt Ewald's "Beauty of Machines" (1925-26), Gropius "Where Artists and Technicians Meet" (1925-26) — attest to diverse philosophic reactions. It is also important to note that the subtlety of these varied reactions fall into the more generalized reactions of the 1910s and 1920s, attitudes that in many ways reflect their pre- and post-war climates: while earlier artists, like the Futurists, tended to romanticize the machine, focusing on how it could change individual lives and subjective experience, later artists, like the Purists, took a more detached and objectified approach, thinking about the social role of the machine and its universal applications.

Among the artists who looked to the mechanical world for inspiration, the Italian Futurists and their ebullient optimism about technology are perhaps the best known today. [221] The painters Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, inspired by the forward-looking embrace of machinery in the poet F.T. Marinetti's 1909 "Futurist Manifesto," wrote their own "Futurist Painting, Technical Manifesto," in 1910. Central to their quest was the desire to capture the speed and power of the modern city, its "dynamic sensation."[222] Looking to machines and technology as muse and rejecting all remnants of the past, including museums, the Futurists used cars and airplanes, electric lights and steam engines, wireless telegraphy and the rapid sequences of chronophotography as their models.[223] Severini, utterly enamored of the

[221] K. G. Pontus Hultén, *The machine as seen as the end of the mechanical age*, 54.

[222] See Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severni, "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910," *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, 27.

[223] As Stephen Kern elucidates in *The Culture of Time in Space*, the early twentieth century inhabited a remarkably different psychological state than the nineteenth: in dramatic contrast to the restrospectively-aimed decisions of the preceding century, the new era determined the present with an eye towards the future and towards the unknown. Kern argues that whereas the psychology of the past determined activity by looking back in time for precedents (he uses the example of wars), the psychology of the twentieth century was governed by events that hadn't happened yet. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (Cambridge, 1983).

machine world, even aspired to become a pilot, which he believed to be the quintessential achievement of the modern man.[224]

Sometimes the Futurist tributes to the industrial world centered on a core mechanistic motif, like Balla's *Speeding Automobile* (1912), a straightforward but novel embodiment of a car's "whirling… steel" (Fig. 13). Sometimes their images *suggested* a machine-centric experience: Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on Leash* (1912) imitates the effect of a chronophotograph's breakdown of movement but, more fundamentally, points to how technological developments informed vision (Fig. 14). After advances like the chronophotograph, it was no longer possible to perceive the world and its movement in quite the same way. Movement was now articulated into precise gestures. Vision itself was becoming mechanized. As photographer Paul Haviland described, "the camera [became] the image of [man's] eye," and artist Moholy-Nagy proposed in his book, *The New Vision,* that photography created an entirely new system of visualization.[225] Whether or not these claims seem true today, the audacity of their claims for technology are a testament to its changed place in the artistic mind. In the space of a single generation, the technophobia of Seurat's contemporaries had reversed to a worshipful technophilia.

Boccioni explained that identification with, and sensitivity to, machines was essential to Futurist philosophy: "We do not want to observe, dissect, and translate" the machine; instead, "we identify ourselves with it."[226] His burnished metal sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), both organic and mechanic, fluid and rigid, is a visual manifestation of the Futurist quest to achieve identification through the blend

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[224] See Severini letter to Marinetti, in Anne Coffin Hanson, *Severni futurista*: *1912-1917* (New Haven, 1995), 136.
[225] Paul Haviland, *291* (Sept-Oct, 1915), 1.
[226] Boccioni, "Fondamento Plastico…" *Lacerba* (March 15, 1913), 52. "Noi non vogliamo osservare, dissecare e trasportare in immagini; noi ci identifichiamo nella cosa, il che è profondamente diverso."

of human and machine (Fig. 15). Throughout Futurist literature, machinery is discussed in human terms, expressing the deep desire to bridge the gap between human and machine. The machine even had emotions: "The suffering of man is of the same interest to us as the suffering of an electric lamp."[227]

Like the Futurists, the British Vorticists granted machines a kind of life. "A machine is in a greater or less degree, a living thing," wrote Wyndam Lewis.[228] But while the Futurists hoped to bring humanity to the machine, the Vorticists sought the opposite: to mechanize the human.[229] Their quest was to make the emotional and pliable weakness of the human more cold and hard like a machine. "The actual human body becomes of less importance every day. It now, literally, exists much less," Lewis reported happily in the group's manifesto, *Blast*.[230] The Vorticists admired the machine's impersonality — its "brutality, [its] stoical embrace…" — and used it to guide them in various ways.[231] Machines were useful morally: they taught lessons on how to live a hardened and cold life, encased in a rigid shell, protected from the whims of emotion and subjective frenzy. Machines were also useful formally. Reacting against the Futurists' obsession with movement, Lewis and his followers felt that the machine, in stillness, was a more poignant and expressive symbol of power. "Its lines and masses *imply* force and action..."[232] The sleek angles and hard edges of the machine provided the artist with a

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[227] From Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, "Futurist Painting Technical Manifesto," in *Futurist Manifestos*, 29.
[228] Wyndam Lewis, *Wyndam Lewis, the Artist: From "Blast" to Burlington House* (New York, 1939), 150.
[229] Willam Charles Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avantgarde* (Manchester, 1972).
[230] Wyndam Lewis, *Blast* No.1 (June 20, 1914), 141.
[231] Wyndam Lewis, "The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks," in *Wyndam Lewis the Artist: From 'Blast' to Burlington House* (London, 1939), 78.
[232] Lewis, *Blast* No. 2 (July 15, 1914), 44.

new language of abstraction. "Machinery is the greatest Earth medium," Lewis noted. "It sweeps away the doctrines of a narrow and pedantic Realism at one stroke."[233]

The Purists also used the formal attributes of the machine as a central directive in their art, but instead of working towards geometric abstraction, their interest lay in the depiction of everyday objects. In 1918, architect Jeanneret (renamed Le Corbusier in 1921) and painter Amedée Ozenfant officially established the Purist movement, first described in *After Cubism*. A reaction against the subjectivity of pre-World War I art, particularly the works of Picasso and Braque, Purism centered on proportion, reason, law, and beauty and looked to both the clarity of the classical past *and* new machine technology for inspiration. Trying to bring order to a world torn asunder by war, the Purists divorced the machine and technology from the militaristic bombast of their artistic predecessors (i.e., the Futurists and Vorticists) and chose instead to exploit it for purely aesthetic reasons.

In their 1920 essay "Purism," Jeanneret and Ozenfant argued that the clean geometry and impersonality of the machine were distinctly tied to the economical aesthetics of an earlier time. The efficient, streamlined, and energy-saving values of the machine age, they proposed, were descended from the visual values of the classics. Far from being remote from human nature, mechanization emphasized and enhanced the artistic impulse toward clarity and revelation:

> It is by the phenomenon of mechanical selection that the forms are established which can almost be called permanent, all interrelated, associated with human scale, containing curves of the greatest capacity, curves of the greatest strength, curves of the greatest elasticity, etc…The machine has applied with a rigor greater than ever the physical laws of the world's structure.[234]

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[233] Lewis, *Blast* No. 1, 39.

[234] Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, "Purism," in *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), 64.

The machine, then, symbolized everything that mattered to man: proportion, geometry, reason, and law.

Fernand Léger, a close friend of Ozenfant and Jeanneret, was also attracted to the formal simplicity of the machine. In the spirit of Ozenfant and Jeannert, Léger observed the industrial world for lessons on how to move art away from what he perceived as the self-indulgent and narrow superficialities of the personal. By using clear geometric forms and strong primary and secondary colors, minimizing brushwork, and suggesting mechanical forms, Léger felt that his paintings reflected a logic that was universally accessible. While his visual memory of seeing sun gleaming on polished machine artillery, as he soldiered for the French Army in 1916, wholeheartedly convinced him of the artistic potential for machine forms, his use of the machine doesn't have the bellicosity of Futurism or Vorticism.[235] Like the Purists, Léger, who trained as an architect, strived in his work to achieve what he called "architectural order" and was drawn to the clean lines and polished planes of the machine for aesthetic inspiration. In "The Machine Aesthetic" (1924), Léger attacked the idea of a contrived artistic conception of beauty:

> Beauty is everywhere, in the arrangement of your pots and pans, on the white walls of your kitchen, more perhaps than in your eighteenth century salon or in the official museum…I would like therefore to speak about a new architectural order: the architecture of the mechanical…The case of the evolution of the automobile form is a striking example of my point; it is even a curious fact that the more the machine perfects its utilitarian functions, the more beautiful it becomes.[236]

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[235] R. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger*, 136. John Golding, "Léger and the Heroism of Modern Life," in *Léger and Purist Paris* (London, 1970), 10.

[236] Ferdinard Léger, "L'Esthétique de la machine; l'object fabriqué, l'artisan et l'artiste," *Bulletin de l'effort Moderne* (Jan-Feb, 1924), 5-6. "Le Beau est partout, dans l'ordre de vos casseroles, sur le mur blanc de votre cuisine, peut-être que dans votre salon XVIIIe siècle ou dans les musées officiels. J'aurai donc à causer d'un ordre architectural nouveau: *l'architecture de la méchanique*…Le cas de'évolution de la forme automobile est un exemple troublant de ce que j'avance, elle est même curieuse par ce fait que, plus la voiture s'est approchée se ses fins utiles, plus elle a été belle."

In Futurist fashion, he looked to machines and technology to find clarity and inspiration but, as art historian John Golding points out, Léger sought a more abstracted version of the machine than his Italian contemporaries, and in his later work – in which he incorporates contemporary machine-made objects like typewriters and reading lamps into his paintings – he used even more concrete and tangible references than the Purists.[237]

Countless other French artists shared this new fascination with machines. The Puteaux, or Salon Cubists, attempted to differentiate their work from what they considered a lack of logic and structure in Cubism.[238] Raymond Duchamp-Villon sculpted a "modern" horse, morphing animal into coiling geometric forms. And from 1910 onwards, Robert Delaunay painted the Eiffel Tower.[239]

For Delaunay, the Tower came to represent the same kind of muse that Mont Sainte-Victoire had been for Cézanne; in the span of a few years, he painted it more than thirty times. While Cézanne's and Monet's recurring motifs came from the natural world, for Delaunay the structured grid of the Tower seemed to offer the rhapsodic allure of modernity itself (Fig. 16 & 17). A generation earlier, during the Tower's construction in the 1880s, Delaunay would have been nearly alone in this reverence. When the structure was complete in 1889, newspapers were filled with rants condemning its blight upon the cityscape, and most nineteenth-century artists joined the backlash, refusing to acknowledge the tower in their work. The novelist Guy de Maupassant insisted on eating

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[237] J. Golding, "Léger and the Heroism of Modern Life," 9, 19.

[238] R. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger*, 155.

[239] Kenneth Silver observes how the stylistic changes that occur in Delaunay's Tower paintings – from his early analytic approach, clearly informed by Cézanne's fusing of surface and depth, to his later synthetic one – reflect the broader artistic mood shifts occurring between the 1910s and 1920s. While the early years of the 1910s were strongly informed by the Cubist (and Cézannian) fascination with breaking things apart, analyzing and probing vision and its limits, artists in the late 1910s and early 1920s concentrated their efforts on putting things back together again, compressing and making whole what was once fractured, in large part responding to destruction the First World War. Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps* (Princeton, 1989), 331.

lunch in the Tower restaurant each day, claiming that it was the only place he could still relax in Paris without being forced to see the Tower on the horizon. For Delaunay, painting the Tower incessantly in the 1920s, it may have been amusing that one of the few nineteenth-century painters to depict the Tower was one of his favorites — Seurat (Fig. 18). (He wrote that in Seurat he found, "all the newness that modern art can reveal.")[240]

In 1911, Francis Picabia became intrigued by the ideals of the Salon Cubists, but it was in 1915, during a trip to the United States, that he became a true devotee of the machine world: "Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression."[241] His machinist style, in which he dryly reproduced machine forms from popular magazines in an attempt to overturn traditional notions of art, began in New York in 1915:

> I have been profoundly impressed by the vast mechanical development in America… In seeking forms through which to interpret ideas or by which to expose human characteristics I have come at length upon the form which appears most brilliantly plastic and fraught with symbolism. I have enlisted the machinery of the modern world, and introduced it into my studio…I mean simply to work on and on until I attain the pinnacle of mechanical symbolism.[242]

The interests of Picabia overlapped neatly with Marcel Duchamp. From 1911 to 1912, the two often joined artists and intellectuals like Apollinaire, Mercereau, and Princet in Puteaux, where they spent hours talking about recent scientific, mathematic, and technological innovations. In early works like *Chocolate Grinder* and *Coffee Mill,* Duchamp used lessons from mechanical drawing and scientific illustration to guide him

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[240] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Croniques d'Art* (Dec 23, 1901), 171.
[241] F. Picabia, "French Artists Spur on American Art," 2.
[242] Ibid.

towards a depersonalized art; at times, he even used dots, mimicking the effect of Marey's chronophotographs (Fig. 19 & 20). The dots, the impersonal detachment of the artist's hand, and the scientific clarity of Duchamp, of course, call to mind the early criticism of Seurat — a fact that Marcel Duchamp happily embraced.

In 1922, the Bauhaus, under the influence of Russian Constructivism and Dutch De Stijl, moved away from the expressive leanings of artists Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky, towards a machine aesthetic guided by functionalism and a passion for geometric abstraction. Walter Gropius, a devotee of handcraft, also became increasingly interested in the machine-generated form. In 1923 he announced, "We want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios, and fast cars."[243] To facilitate this shift, Gropius hired Moholy-Nagy as instructor of the foundation course.[244] Trained as an engineer, Moholy-Nagy approached the arts with methodical rigor. For him the form and system of the machine was a utopian revelation. "Before the machine, everyone is equal — I can use it, so can you… There is no tradition in technology, no consciousness of class or standing. Everyone can be the machine's master or its slave."[245]

Perhaps most emblematic of this shift in perception was The Museum of Modern Art's 1934 exhibition, *Machine Art*, which displayed propellers, typewriters, ball bearings, and toasters (Fig. 21). Philip Johnson, organizer of the show, later remarked in an interview with, "a machine made an ideology, a theme that would be good to substitute for the handcrafts," removing the artist altogether from the equation.[246]

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[243] Quoted in William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, 1983), 309-16.
[244] From Walter Gropius *Idee und Aufbau* (1923), quoted in Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Boston, 1980), 282.
[245] Quoted in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou (Chicago, 1998), 300.
[246] Philip Johnson to Sharon Zane, *Philip Johnson: Oral History* (1991).

From France to Italy, America to England, and Holland to Germany, the art world had been seized by this machine aesthetic, where the work of Georges Seurat would find an entirely new reception.

THE ARTIST'S WELCOME

Into this new era, the vocabulary of mechanization would continue to follow Seurat, but the meaning of those words would change dramatically. Seurat was scientific, yes, and impersonal and even cold, but far from carrying a negative connotation, suddenly these words conveyed greatness, foresight, and moral virtue. Seurat was a man ahead of his time. The critic and painter Georges Bissière explained this shift in the article "Notes sur l'art de Seurat," in 1920:

> For impertinent romantics [nineteenth-century viewers], all that is thought is cold, all that is ordered is boring, and reason is the most hateful of gifts. Seurat was, without doubt, judged severely by some disheveled aesthetes but the prestige of time shelters these quarrels. He proved, and it was even more necessary to prove, the importance of maintaining his cold blood in front of the canvas and that always dominating his sensibility is the only attitude that can lead to serene works, bypassing the accidental…[247]

The ability to control or expel emotion, to embrace reason as guide, was fundamental to many artists in the early twentieth century (especially post World War I) and, looking back on Seurat, they saw one of the few painters from the prior century who understood the importance of conception over instinct. While Seurat's contemporaries lamented his cold and impersonal art, for twentieth-century viewers the same features shone like a

[247] Georges Bissière, "Notes sur l'art de Seurat," *L'Esprit nouveau* 1,1 (October 15, 1920), 14. "Pour ces romantiques impénitents, tout ce qui est réfléchi est froid, tout ce qui est ordonné est ennuyeux, et la raison est le plus haïssable des dons. Seurat eût sans doute été sévèrement jugé par quelques esthètes échevelés, si le prestige que le temps a conféré à son œuvre ne le mettait à l'abri et au-dessus des querelles. Il a pourtant prouvé, s'il était encore nécessaire de le prouver, que le fait de garder son sang-froid devant la toile et de dominer toujours sa sensibilité est la seule attitude qui puisse mener à des œuvres sereines, dépassant l'accidentel…"

beacon from the depths of the nineteenth century, a notorious bastion of emotion and frenzy, into the cool modern era. Duchamp praised Seurat as the "the only man in the past who I really respected" and the "greatest scientific spirit of the nineteenth century."[248] Ozenfant extolled the cold rationality of Seurat, in contrast to Renoir's emotional exuberance: "Seurat is dry, as dry as a dry champagne… But do not reproach Seurat for being a descendant of the Athenian rather than the Flemish tradition."[249] Artist Jean Hélion set the logical and predetermined work of Seurat at the opposite pole of the small-minded Cézanne: "Seurat builds, engineers his pictures. Cézanne is a mason, masoning, touch by touch, with no plans… With Seurat an absolute integrity of what is there, the minimum of hand-effect."[250] Seurat, with his "technician's mind," was the artistic personality in favor among artists like Duchamp and Hélion, Ozenfant and Léger, who wanted to replace the impetuous artistic persona with the steadiness of the architect, the chemist, the engineer.

Seurat's work, with its formal purity and theoretical bent, also embodied prime characteristics coursing through early twentieth century art: construction, rationality, triumph over nature, anonymity, and geometric forms.[251] In 1947, Germain Seligman explained the early twentieth-century's embrace of Seurat:

> It is easy to realize today what a spiritual leader Seurat must have been for the young artists who in the first decade of this century were in search of just such geometrical laws as those he had set for himself, laws of a universe where inspiration was led, guided and held in check by numbers and figures. They are

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[248] Marcel Duchamp quoted in Anonymous (Henry McBride?), "A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast," *Arts and Decoration* (1915): 427. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York, 1968): 24-25.

[249] Amédée Ozenfant, "Seurat," *Cahiers d'Art* 1, 7 (September, 1926), 172. "…Seurat est sec, sec comme un champagne brut…mais ne reprochez pas à Seurat d'être de la lignée d'Athènes et non de celle des Flandres…"

[250] Jean Hélion, "Seurat as a Predecessor," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 69, 400 (July 1936), 10.

[251] R. Herbert, *Millet to Léger*, 65-166.

> the perennial formulae of harmony, balance and beauty, true in the days of the Assyrians and the Greeks, renovated perhaps to fit a new scientific world…How could the coming generation in search of a new absolute not rally to Seurat's theories and go on from where he left off?... Seurat… was the real chief of this new ambitious group of renovators…"[252]

If Seurat's contemporaries shunned the emotional detachment of his work, these critics saw the early rejection as yet another sign of his prescience and genius.

Of course, some critics persisted for Seurat: Kahnweiler, for example, admired Seurat's simplified forms, but felt his extreme devotion to research prevented him from working out pictorial problems organically. Instead of "realizing on the canvas itself," he imposed too much at the outset.[253] Others, like the critic Roger Fry and art historian Lionelli Venturi, had similar criticism for some of Seurat's work, and when Matisse experimented briefly with neo-impressionism in his 1904-05 *Luxe, calme, et volupté*, his work was dismissed by critics like Louis Vauxcelles as a foolish "incursion into the realm of the theoreticians of the dot" (Fig. 22).[254] Another critic, Maurice Denis advised Matisse to guard his painterly nature "against theoretical excess."[255] Even Matisse himself would eventually disparage neo-impressionism as too stiff. Still, as the twentieth century pressed on, more artists and critics began to accept Seurat's role as a pioneer in the emerging machine aesthetic of the time.

Several large exhibitions in Paris, one of the Société des Artistes Indépendants in 1905 and the other, the *Exposition Georges Seurat*, at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in

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[252] Germain Seligman, *The Drawings of Georges Seurat* (New York, 1947), 37.

[253] Contrasting Seurat with Cézanne, Kahnweiler writes "Vouloir 'faire du Poussin sur nature,' c'est la même contradiction interne à laquelle se heurte Seurat, mais la façon dont Cézanne tente de la résoudre doit tout à Delacroix, rien à Ingres, Cézanne, ami des Impressionnistes, trouve à sa disposition un métier qui lui permet un *travail créateur sur la toile*, pour mener à bien sa tentative qui est parallèle de celle à Seurat, tend, comme elle, à douer de durée ce qui est fortuit." Daniel Henry-Kahnweiler, "La Place de Georges Seurat," 55.

[254] Louis Vauxcelles, *Gil Blas* (October 14, 1904). Quoted in Catherine Bock-Weiss, *Henri Matisse and neo-impressionism, 1898-1908* (Ann Arbor, 1977), 80.

[255] Maurice Denis, "Painting," *L'Ermitage* (May 15, 1905). Reprinted in T*héories (1890-1910): Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1920), 196-197.

1908-09, brought Seurat's work visibly into the new century, cementing the notion that he was a precursor of twentieth-century modernism. In addition, despite the disintegration of Seurat's neo-impressionist followers in the late 1890s, Paul Signac was still working fervently as a neo-impressionist – riding on the coattails of his 1899 publication *D'Euguene Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* – and his version of neo-impressionism was a familiar part of the early twentieth-century artistic landscape (perhaps even more familiar than Seurat), with frequent showings of his work at venues like the Salons des Indépendants. For example, Matisse's contact with neo-impressionism came via Signac – Jean Puy described that the younger painter was "carried away" after seeing a hefty show of Signac's paintings at Parisian Druet Gallery in 1904 – and his *Luxe*, with its regularly-placed rectangular mosaics, reflects Signac's (not Seurat's) version of neo-impressionism.[256]

Artists began to experiment with the method of Seurat and his followers – some exploring the purity of color, others the distillation of form, still others the impersonal brushstroke. With each embrace, the neo-impressionist influence spread across the artistic landscape, from Severini to Balla, Matisse to Derain, Lhote to Villon, Metzinger to Delaunay, Kandinsky to Klee, Picasso to Braque. The impact of the Neo-Impressionists was undeniable, and indeed, no one hoped to deny it, for Seurat was a man ahead of his time, his "method," as he had called it, perfectly suited to the tastes and values of the early twentieth century. As art historian Robert Rey put it in his 1921 text *La renaissance du sentiment classique*, "All the abstract in his effort projected him well ahead of the tastes of his time towards the profound desires that torment ours."[257]

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[256] John Elderfield, *The"Wild Beasts": Fauvism and Its Affinities* (New York, 1976), 32.

[257] Robert Rey, *La renaissance du sentiment classique dans la peinture française à la fin du XIXè siècle* (Paris, 1921), 134. "Et tout l'abstrait de son effort se projetait bien en avant des goûts de son temps vers les désirs prodonds qui tourmentent le nôtre."

For artistic movements like the Futurists, whose artistic theory and whose name itself emphasized a forward progress, recognizing a predecessor in Seurat also provided a kind of validation.[258] Seurat moved painting forward, but he also anchored forward-looking movements with a predecessor they could claim. At the same time, his work pointed toward other bygone artists. "It is Seurat, understood and absorbed by the young painters of the twentieth century, who eventually made it possible for them to recognize Delacroix," the art critic André Salmon wrote.[259]

For many, it was Seurat's methodical "dot" that gave his work the air of modernity. While nineteenth-century commentators railed against the mechanicity of his marks, now critics celebrated his frozen hands, a rejection of conventional touch. Between 1905 and 1908, painters like Metzinger and Delaunay began to imitate the regularity of the neo-impressionist mark, morphing Seurat's dabs into larger and more rectangular mosaics – reminiscent more of Signac than Seurat – and becoming even more mechanical than the original (Fig. 23 & 24). As critic Louis Chassevent observed in 1906, Metzinger "brings more precision" than his neo-impressionist predecessor "to the cutting of his cubes of color which appear to have been made mechanically."[260]

While the Futurists couldn't conceive of their paintings without Segantini's example – "We conclude that painting cannot exist today without Divisionism. Divisionism… we declare essential and necessary," they affirmed in their 1910 Manifesto – the neo-impressionist interest in color and light also established a precedent.[261] For

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[258] Umberto Boccioni et al., "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto" (1910) in *Futurist Manifestos*, 27-31.
[259] André Salmon, "La Révélation de Seurat," *Propos d'Atelier* (Paris, 1922), 43. "C'est Seurat subi, compris, absorbé par les jeunes peintres du vingtième siècle, qui leur permet de nommer enfin Delacroix."
[260] Quoted in Robert Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism* (New York, 1968), 221.
[261] Umberto Boccioni, et al. "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910" in *Futurist Manifestos*, 29. In his autobiography Severini remarked on the two distinct strains of Futurism: "For the sake of criticism and history, it would be helpful to make a distinction between Futurism as conceived in Milan and more or less influenced by Jugendstil, as well as being a continuation of the Lombardian tradition of Segantini, Previati,

painters like Balla and Severini, absorbed in "the vivifying current of science," the neo-impressionist mark of Seurat was the perfect method in their quest to capture the energy of the modern world — its atomistic activity a reflection of the scientific spirit and even of modernity itself.[262] Severini claimed Seurat as his muse, recording in his autobiography that the artist's theoretical example encouraged him to research the mathematical foundation of form: "…I always considered Neo-Impressionism my point of departure and Seurat my master. In my opinion, the idea of classical tendencies was brilliantly represented…by Seurat, and I continued to work in that direction. I intended to bring to life and to form that scientific spirit that the Neo-Impressionists had brought to color."[263] While the connection between Severini and Seurat is well known, the art historian Kenneth Silver argues that the current of Seurat also ran strongly through other Futurists, manifesting itself in the subject matter and brushwork of Boccioni and Carrá: "The art of Seurat…is probably the single greatest artistic source for early Futurism…. His belief in science and the applicability of its laws to picture-making gave him a special status with all self-proclaimed forward-looking artists at the turn of the century."[264]

Severini argued that Seurat's impact extended beyond the Futurists and that sometimes artists, like Picasso, didn't even realize the connection: "What set me apart from Picasso was that he, basically, looked to Corot as one of his masters at that historical moment. I, instead, looked to Seurat as my point of departure and my

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Tallone, etc., and Futurism as conceived in Montmartre, a consequence of Neo-Impressionism (Seurat and Signac) and van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, etc." Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 37. "Ma in campo critico e storico, sarebbe forse utile fare una distinzione fra il Futurismo nata a Milano, e più o meno influenzato dallo Jugendstil, e in continuazione della pittura lombarda, da Segantini, Previati, Tallone, ecc. e il Futurismo nato a Montmartre, conseguenza del neo-impressionismo (Seurat, Signac) e van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas. ecc." Gino Severini, *La vita di un pittore* (Milan, 1965), preface Lamberto Vitali, 49.

[262] Boccioni et al., "Futurist Painting Technical Manifesto," in *Futurist Manifestos*, 28.

[263] Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, translated by Jennifer Franchina (Princeton, 1995), 209.

[264] Kenneth E. Silver, "Futurism on the Grand Canal," *Art in America* 74, 10 (October, 1986), 119.

master….[but] he moved away from Corot little my little and moved closer to Seurat."[265] Certainly, Picasso and Braque used the neo-impressionist mark for its decorative quality as a static, patterned element in paintings like *Green Still Life* (1914) and *Bottle of Rum* (1914) during their Synthetic phase (Fig. 25 & 26).[266] According to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Seurat's rejection of ostentatious handling appealed to these Cubists, and he praised Seurat for choosing a technique that "renounced the skills of the brush, making trickery impossible, leaving no place for bits of bravura."[267] For Kahnweiler, the artist's "impersonal execution" inhabited the same environment as Picasso's and Braque's papier collés, works in which the hand doesn't participate in a traditional way, since it doesn't directly touch the surface of the paper and is only involved in cutting and pasting.[268] Later, in a 1954 colloquium "Problems of Color," the art historian Meyer Schapiro argued that Seurat's "homogenous" treatment of all formal elements was an important precedent for Cubist collage. "In Cubism, we see elements that come from Seurat, not only in their imitation of his little touch… but in the fact that all that is line, touch,

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[265] Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 95-96. "Quel che mi divideva da Picasso è che, in fondo, lui vedeva in Corot uno dei maestri di quell momento storico; io invece prendevo Seurat come punto di partenza e come maestro. Lui considerava la mia posizione un po' superata, sopratutto dopo il 'Fauves'; e non aveva forse tutti i torti; ma non era questa una ragione per tornare a delle formule precedettero l'Impressionismo. Del resto piano piano lasciò il suo Corot, e si avvicinò a Seurat." Gino Severini, *La vita di un pittore*, 117.

[266] In 1907 Braque painted *The Little Bay of Ciotat*, a neo-impressionist inspired canvas (although Braque dismissed the association). After selling the painting he bought it back, something he rarely did. He wrote "it's a Fauve painting that doesn't roar," implying he may have learned something about quieting his hand from Seurat. See Alex Danchev, *Georges Braque: a Life* (New York, 2005), 47.

[267] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "La place de Georges Seurat," 56-57. "…cette technique renonce aux habiletés de la brosse, rend impossible toute tricherie, ne laisse aucune place aux morceaux de bravoure."

[268] Kahnweiler, ibid., 57. "Cette une execution impersonnelle que tentait de réaliser Seurat (comme après lui, les Cubistes, dans les Papiers collés…" Richard Shiff makes the point that while traditional media, like paint and graphite can become immaterial through manipulation, the paper used by both Picasso and Braque in their papier collés cannot disappear. It constantly asserts its presence like some "foreign source." And because of this remains visibly present and evokes the sense of touch. Shiff also notes how Picasso ingeniously encourages the sense of touch through his act of cutting certain forms, like the pear in his *Ace of Clubs*. Looking at the pear and thinking of Picasso cutting the form, we mimetically recreate the act of cutting and may think, in some way, of cutting a real three-dimensional pear. See Richard Shiff, "Picasso's Touch: Collage, Papier Collé, Ace of Clubs," *Yale University Art Bulletin* (1990), 38-47.

surface has the same quality of facture. One could say that the 'tachisme' of Seurat is already a collage, that the world is reconstructed and that each element is an element enlarged from the physical world."[269]

Many early writers on Cubism emphasized Picasso's and Braque's impersonal work, contrasting it to the intuitive quality of painters like Matisse and the Impressionists. Guillaume Apollinaire, in his 1913 *Aesthetic Meditations*, wrote that Picasso, Braque, Gris, Gleizes, and Laurencin were "scientific" Cubists, who didn't rely on "sight" but on "insight," their conceptualized work impervious to the idiosyncratic turns of brush that were typically used to identify an artist's hand: "The geometrical aspect… came from the fact that the essential reality was rendered with great purity, while visual accidents and anecdotes had been eliminated."[270] Apollinaire also identified Seurat as a predecessor for this intellectually abstract approach: "in [Seurat's] works the firmness of style is rivaled by the almost scientific clarity of conception. (*Le Chahut* and *The Circus* almost belong to scientific cubism.)" (Fig. 27 & 28) [271] Apollinaire further distanced Seurat's work from the sensuality of paint by characterizing the artist's work as "drawn," ascribing to them the rigor and intellect of pure line.[272]

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[269] Meyer Schapiro, in the discussion "Problems of Color," printed in *Exposés et discussions du Colloque du Centre de Recherches de Psychologie* (Paris, 1957), 251.

[270] G. Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations*, 17. "Scientific cubism is one of the pure tendencies. It is the art of painting new structures out of elements borrowed not from the reality of sight, but from the reality of insight." 17 G.A. Les Peintres Cubistes, 24. "Le cubisme scientifique est une de ces tendances pures. C'est l'art de peindre des ensembles nouveaux avec des éléments empruntés, non à la réalite de vision, mais à la réalité de connaissance." G. Apollinaire, *Les Peintres Cubistes*, 24. "L'aspect géometrique qui a frappé si vivement ceux qui ont vu les premières toiles scientifiques venait de ce que la réalité essentielle y était rendue avec une grane pureté et que l'accident visuel et anecdotique en avait été éliminé."

[271] G. Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, 26. G. Apollinaire, *Peintres Cubistes*, 44-45. "Seurat, avec une précision que l'on peut appeler génie, a tracé de son époque quleque tableaux oú la fermeté du style est égale à la netteté presque scientifique de la conception, le (*chahut, le cirque* qui ressortissent presque au *cubisme scientifique*)."

[272] G. Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, 26. "Seurat has drawn, with a precision that amounts to genuis, certain pictures of the life of the period…." "Seurat, avec une précision que l'on peut appeler génie, a tracé de son époque quleque tableaux…Il a tout redressé dans l'art de son temps pour fixer les gestes qui

The connection of Seurat's mark to the rationality of science was resonant in the early twentieth century. In 1926, art historian Robert Rey commented on Seurat's "scientific" technique, as it conveyed the "matter" and "weight" of radioactive energy.[273] He observed that *La Grande Jatte* had a "cinematic," almost "supernatural," quality of slowing things down, revealing things unseen by the naked eye: "Seurat constantly gives us the impression that he is a kind of visionary and that he perceives — that which he makes us perceive — the radioactive energy that activates the most inert objects."[274] To Rey, Seurat's ponderous light was life-like because it related to the work of "a professor Langevin who proved that light has weight."[275] Like Physicist Paul Langevin, who studied the properties of light, Seurat revealed the essential sub-structure unknown to the naked eye.

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caractérisent cette fin de siècle…"44-45. Carl Einsten said that the Cubists were the first artists to become totally "indifferent to technique." "Ces 'papiers-collés" exhibent en effet une indifférence totale à l'égard de la technique; ils constituent une rupture avec le 'beau morceau' de peinture…." Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque* (New York, 1934), 101. Fénéon would argue that Seurat preceded them – an idea that art historian William Rubin has continued to explore more recently. William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque Pioneering Cubism* (New York, 1989), 19. Braque even admitted that while he and Picasso worked closely together,from 1910-14, they we were deliberately working toward an anonymous art, without identifying marks, explaining "[We] were engaged in what we felt was a search for the anonymous personality. We were inclined to efface our ow personalities in order to find originality." And Picasso, ostensibly reported to Françoise Gilot: "we didn't sign our canvases" because "we felt the temptation, the hope for an anonymous art…" See W. Rubin, 19. Seurat's aloofness and detachment must have loomed as precedent. Quoted in Alex Danchev, *Georges Braque, A Life* (New York, 2005), 112.

[273] Robert Rey, "A propos du Cirque de Seurat au Musée du Louvre*," Beaux-arts; chronique des arts et de la curiosite* 4, 6 (March 15, 1926), 88. Rey contrasted Seurat's "tactile" handling of light to the Impressionists' "atmospheric" or "transparent" handling. "Les impressionnistes avaient voulu peindre l'atmosphère. Il semble que pour Seurat la lumière ait été une sorte de matière. Le professeur Langevin n'a-t-il pas démontré que la lumière a un poids et qu'on peut faire dévier un rayon lumineux en dehors de la ligne droite?"

[274] See R. Rey, *La Renaissance du sentiment classique*, 119. "Seurat nous donne constamment l'impression qu'il est une sorte de voyant et qu'il aperçoit – qu'il nous fait apercevoir soudain – l'énergie radioactive dont l'objet le plus inerte est sans doute animé." Futurists were drawn to Seurat for this slow down (or blow up) that facilitated the breakdown of movement and light.

[275] R. Rey, "A propos du Cirque," 88. "Le professeur Langevin n'a-t-il pas démontré que la lumière a un poids et qu'on peut faire dévier un rayon lumineux en dehors de la ligne droite?"

While Marcel Duchamp did not borrow overtly from Seurat, he openly admired the artist's devotion to science, intellectual method, and impersonal touch. Explaining how he arrived at his firm anti-painting stance, Duchamp stated:

> …of course I just wanted to react against what the others were doing, Matisse and the rest, all that work of the hand. In French there is an old expression, *la patte*, meaning the artist's touch, his personal style, his 'paw.' I wanted to get away from la patte… The only man in the past whom I really respected was Seurat, who made his big paintings like a carpenter, like an artisan. He didn't let his hand interfere with his mind. Anyway, from 1912 on I decided to stop being a painter in the professional sense.[276]

Duchamp enjoyed Seurat because he got his "patte" (paw; hand; also a play on paté and the connection of French art to the complexity and tradition of French cooking) out of his pictures — precisely the same reason Fénéon had given, in 1886, for embracing Seurat's work in *La Grande Jatte*:

> Each part of his immense painting, *la Grande-Jatte*, demonstrates the monotonous and patient spots, that look like tapestry: here, in effect, the hand is useless, it is impossible to cheat; no place for moments of bravura; — the hand is numb — on an ostrich, a bale of straw, a wave or a rock the movement of the brush remains the same.[277]

Even if Duchamp gave little thought to the origin of the term pointillism and its relationship to tapestry, he appreciated precisely the stitch-like quality of Seurat's mark, an effect in which the artist's hand was, as Fénéon says, "numb." To Duchamp, this was a quality to be admired. Seeking to achieve a similar effect, Duchamp literally embraced the stitch in his 1914 *Chocolate Grinder, No. 2* supplanting brushwork with actual sewing to proffer the most "numb" hand possible (Fig. 19).

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[276] Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York, 1965), 24-25.

[277] Félix Fénéon, "VIIIe exposition impressioniste," *La vogue* 1 (June 13, 1886) reprinted in *Félix Fénéon Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1970), 1:36. "Son immense tableau, la *Grande-Jatte*, en quelque partie qu'on examine, s'étale, monotone et patiente tavelure, tapisserie: ici, en effet, la patte est inutile, le truquage impossible; nulle place pour les morceaux de bravoure; – que la main soit gourde, mais que l'œil soit agile, perspicace et savant; sur une autruche, une botte de paille, une vague ou un roc la manœvre du pinceau reste la meme."

"My hand became my enemy in 1912," Duchamp wrote. "I wanted to get away from the palette."[278] Seurat, he said, "didn't let his hand interfere with his mind," and provided guidance and inspiration.[279] He praised Seurat as one of only a few painters who were not "retinal." When asked about this during an interview with Dorè Ashton, Duchamp explained:

> Mondrian was not retinal, Seurat was not, but Cèzanne and Monet were. The whole century since 1880 works in retinal terms. Only sensuous feeling. It's like a bath. I got out of the bath.[280]

Duchamp believed that the art of Monet and Cézanne stemmed from the Realism of Courbet, a painter "who just puts down what he sees."[281] In other words, Duchamp felt that retinal artists blindly copied the world, "just concentrat[ing] on what comes in at the eye," and therefore finding their compositions ready-made in nature.[282] Driven by sight and the desire to record the seen world through an elaborate play of paint, their instinctual painting was devoid of ideas. Duchamp derided retinal art as "olfactory," work characterized by a painter's love for the smell of paint, a sensual attraction to materials themselves.[283] In the thick impasto of a Courbet or Cézanne, he found the artist's sensual bias a decadent indulgence. Looking at Courbet or Monet, Duchamp could practically smell the saccharine viscosity and sensory overload.

Though Seurat was intrigued by vision and perception, to Duchamp he was not "retinal" because his painting extended beyond what the eye sees to an intellectually

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[278] From a late interview; quoted in Arthur C. Danto, "The Bride and the Bottle Rack," *The Nation*, August 23, 1999, 29-30. Many Dada artists, like Hans Arp and Hannah Hoch, used sewing as way to extricate signs of the hand.
[279] Quoted in Tomkins, *Bride and the Bachelors*, 24.
[280] Marcel Duchamp interview with Dore Ashton, "An Interview with Marcel Duchamp," *Studio International*, 171 (June 1966), 245.
[281] C. Tomkins, *The Bride*, 13.
[282] C. Tomkins, *The Bride*, 13.
[283] Ibid.

ordered method. Painting in a less instinctive and personal way, Seurat de-emphasized the subject and embellished the idea. In paintings like *La Grande Jatte*, *Parade de cirque*, and *Cirque,* he elevated the idea that art *is* concept (Fig. 1, Fig. 8, Fig. 28).[284] His smooth and uninflected surfaces, absent of superfluous materiality, appealed to Duchamp as an artist with "no essential satisfaction… in painting ever…."[285]

Like Duchamp, artist Jean Hélion was exhilarated by Seurat's even and steady touch, writing, "His pointillism, fully mechanized, is like the half-tone process of preproduction… The small spots of colors that he uses are doses, almost homeopathic in size. They accomplish their function of synthesis of light, anonymously….With Seurat, an absolute integrity of what is there, the minimum of hand-effect."[286] Hélion contrasted this frank approach to that of Cézanne:

> It is no enthusiasm of the hand as in Cézanne…It is not the result of a scene of love between a spot and a painter, as in the case of Cézanne, whose glances at the model are like fingers fingering amorously all over, with deforming but devoted passion. Deformations by Cezanne are traces of grips, of huggings, of coups d'oeil, chiefly physical…They are not freely-taken decisions as are Seurat's deformations…His decisions result from the enthusiasm of the hand and the eyes…Cezanne's elements are bound by brushstrokes.[287]

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[284] The group De Stijl, founded in 1917 by Mondrian and others, was organized around the quest to achieve the universal in art. To abolish the personal of artist and medium (signs of the material world) members of De Stijl imagined a universal art that would eventually absorb all the idiosyncrasies of personality and medium.

[285] Quoted in C. Tomkins, *The Bride*, 113. Duchmap finds a similar touch-free appeal in Mondrian. In a test conducted by Dr. Michael Noll – mentioned by Meyer Schapiro in his essay "Mondrian" – a computer-simulated version of Mondrian's 1917 painting *Composition with Lines* was presented along with a copy of his original to a group of people who were asked to identify which one was done by the artist's hand. The majority of people chose the computer version as the Mondrian because it had more random elements in it and some described it as more "varied" and "imaginative" than the original. See Meyer Schapiro, "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting" (1978) in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1982), 252-254. Mondrian's hand, his touch, went undetected – something that would, no doubt, delight Duchamp.

[286] Jean Hélion, "Seurat as predecessor," 13.

[287] J. Hélion, "Seurat as predecessor," 10, 13.

While Cézanne's mark conveyed his passionate involvement with subject and touch, Seurat's marks showed no emotion whatsoever; Hélion explained the virtue in this quiet and unaffected approach:

> Noise should not be confused with strength, agitation with rhythm, and violent technique with spiritual violence. Seurat never painted bellowing pictures. His paintings reached a violent intensity through delicacy. His simplicity is made of richness. He does not underline his effects, which is the property of weakness and insecurity. No scratches, no acrobatics, no tricks. All is direct, transparent, real.[288]

Instead of complicating technique with romantic flourishes, Seurat reduced, refined; instead of bombast, he whispered, simplifying the technique so that his presence was there, but always gentle, never intruding upon the painting. Lucie Cousturier also felt that, by choosing a steady hand over an exuberant and wild one, Seurat remained impervious to the risks of superficial play. Like Hélion, she found in his rejection of bravura handling a sign of strength. Seurat's work was "without weakness."[289] Seurat didn't paint, Cousturier claimed, he wrote with paint: "Seurat used the division of colors so that he could clearly write with the tints of the prism…."[290] With his controlled brushwork, Seurat rejected "emotion," "craft," "the seduction of tricks, the prestige of facture," and "chance."[291] His "impersonal procedure" allowed him to "conquer his canvases, without detours or fear."[292] Alexander Watt also used a writing metaphor to emphasize the degree to which Seurat achieved emotional detachment:

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[288] J. Hélion, ibid., 14.

[289] Lucie Cousturier, *Seurat* (Paris, 1921), 14. "Quand Seurat étend au chromatisme l'application du contraste efficace, c'est avec une même decision exempte de faiblesse."

[290] L. Cousturier, *Seurat*, 12. "Pour les observer mieux, il concluait à l'utilité de la technique de la division des couleurs qui permet d'écrire lisiblement avec les teintes du prisme…."

[291] L. Cousturier, Seurat, 14. "C'est sans émoi qu'il rejette le métier appris à l'école, les séductions des jus, le prestige des factures. Ce qu'il veut dire est pressant et se passé de chances."

[292] L. Cousturier, *Seurat*, 14-15. "Muni de ce procédé impersonnel: le point fait servir aux exigences d'un audacieux parti pris, il conquiert sûrement ses toiles, sans detours ni peur."

> Seurat was, in truth, all reasoning. Every work left his hands frozen, one might say, by a mind refractory of any joyous impulse. Every work constituted a duty wherein there must be no mistake. To paint well for him was to paint correctly. The genius of Seurat may be attributed to a well-learnt grammar and a love of pictorial syntax.[293]

Because he knew where he was going ahead of time, Seurat wasn't plagued by the usual artistic ambivalence and uncertainty of outcome. There were no distractions, no deviations, nothing excessive or self-indulgent. Like neat, diligent, and "correct" handwriting, his technique was completely legible. More than a painting, Hélion felt that Seurat's *Le Chenal de Gravelines: Petit-Fort-Philippe* (1890) was a text, remarking that it "[had] nothing to do with nature… I can read it. It is clearer for me than nature. I cannot read nature; it is not written" (Fig. 29).[294] Seurat was honest, straightforward, transparent, easy to follow. His work stood opposite to the self-focused art embodied by painters like the Impressionists and Cézanne. "Could anything be further from the procedure of the Impressionists with… their reliance on instinct rather than law!" Walter Pach exclaimed.[295]

While Cézanne had been the artist in favor – *the* predecessor of modern art – at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, by the first years of the 1920s, artists like Severini and Hélion and historians like Pach began attacking his work as too impetuous and emotionally driven. Earlier in the twentieth century, commentators detached Cézanne from the variability of impressionist vision and technique, connecting him instead to artists like Poussin and the stability and order of the French classical tradition. But the clear connection between Cézanne with the rationality of classicism began to erode by the early 1920s when many critics lumped him together with the

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[293] Alexander Watt, "Notes from Paris: The Art of Georges Seurat," *Apollo* 23 (1936), 169.
[294] J. Hélion, "Seurat as a Predecessor," 4.
[295] Walter Pach, "Georges Seurat (1859-1891)" *The Arts* 3, 5 (March, 1923), 169. Separately published as *Georges Seurat* (New York, 1923).

impressionists and the new consensus view was that he was an artist concerned with vision and subjectivity, with taking things apart, rather than putting them together. Severni's 1921 book *Du Cubisme au Classicisme* records this shift in perception:

I believed, like everyone else, in the "classical tendency" of Cézanne; but now that I see clearly the sensory origin of his "intentions," …. In recent years we believed that, finally, we had found a point of departure in the work of Cézanne….I believe that this point of departure is false and that anything that one would want to build on him will crumble, having as a basis all that is most ephemeral, most unstable, most variable on earth: our own sensations….I think I can affirm today that the path to follow is precisely the opposite of that followed by Cézanne. One does not become classical by sensation, but by the mind….Cézanne was too much a painter of "temperament" to make use of the compass and of number; he based his work only on his eyes….That is why he was never satisfied, why he ceaselessly started the same painting over and over again…[296]

In the 20s with the rising interest in construction, rationality, and synthesis – a phenomenon largely attributed to a world traumatized by the fracturing of war – it was Seurat who was seen as a beacon of hope, a nineteenth-century predecessor who connected the modern constructors with the great tradition of past constructors, establishing a line back to artists like Ingres and Poussin.[297] Seurat was rational, he was scientific, he subverted emotion and subjectivity in favor of the clear, constrained, and orderly. Instead of analyzing and breaking things apart, he synthesized, merged, brought things together in a coherent and clear way.

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[296] Gino Severini, *Du Cubisme au Classicisme*, original ed. (Paris, 1921), reprinted in *Dal Cubismo al classicismo*, ed. Piero Pacini (Florence, 1972), 57. "J'ai cru comme tout le monde à la 'tendence classique' de Cézanne; mais maintenant que je vois clair dans l'origine sensorielle de ses 'intentions,' je ne puis plus croire à une homme qui veut faire 'du Poussin sur nature,' qui veut 'redevenire classique par la nature, c'est-à-dire par la sensation.' Je reste cependant son grand admirateur, et je lui suis reconnaissant de certaines indications que ses oeuvres, toutes instinctives et qualitatives qu'elles soient, m'ont données

[297] Kenneth Silver explores the rise and fall of the two artists: "…there is a see-saw phenomenon in the shifting reputation of Cézanne and Seurat in the 1920s: the degree to which Cézanne was devalued was the degree to which Seurat gained new prestige; the qualities that were now thought lacking in Cézanne were the same qualities that Seurat now seemed to possess in abundance." Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 336.

As Kenneth Silver points out in his 1989 book *Esprit de Corps*, a close look at Seurat's exhibition history in the early twentieth century reveals the growing appeal of the artist.[298] While there were five exhibitions in the first decade of the twentieth century showing the work of Seurat (three of them solo exhibitions), from 1910-1920 there were only three exhibitions, none of them devoted solely to Seurat. Instead, Seurat experienced a boom in the 1920s. 1920 opened with the *Exposition Georges Seurat* at Bernheim-Jeune in Paris (the last *Exposition Georges Seurat* was in 1908-09). Bernheim-Jeune was followed by four one-man shows in Paris, London, and Berlin – all in the twenties.[299] In addition to the more visible Seurat, the twenties also saw a flurry of writing on the artist: there were eight monographs devoted to the artist and thirty-four articles, reflecting the strengthening position of the painter and his reputation.[300] If he had been admired in the first years of the 1900s, by the 1920s he was loved, even adored – *the* artist to emulate.

It wasn't just artists who recognized the potential and implication of Seurat's unemotional mark; critics too were struck by its revolutionary quality. Instead of restricting painting with his monastic hand, the painter's mark-making liberated art from the strict notion that "good" art had to have raw emotion as its impetus. For his 1929 catalog on the Museum of Modern Art's *First Loan Exhibition*, curator Alfred Barr, believed Seurat's touch to be uniform and impersonal: "Seurat applied little round dots of equal size, thereby eliminating… all trace of the personal touch," but felt that this restriction didn't inhibit creativity, remarking, "Seurat proves that great art can proceed from cool exquisite calculation."[301]

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[298] K. Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 337.
[299] For a record of Seurat's exhibition history, see Robert Herbert, *Seurat* (New York, 1991), 413-422.
[300] K. Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 337.
[301] Alfred Barr, *The Museum of Modern Art First Loan Exhibition*: *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh* (New York, 1929), 24, 27.

In his 1920 "Georges Seurat," published in the first issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, critic and artist Georges Bissière argued that this cool calculation was a form of supreme self-control: "[Seurat's] mind directs his hand, he drives it and protects it against visual failures. He knows what he wants, he wants to know where he's going, and refuses to let himself be directed by the canvas."[302] Seurat would not give in to the materials or surrender to the whims of his own hand. "The worker, bending over his canvas, does not like to be spoken to of poetry," Georges Duthuit marveled, "He is quite content to apply his method, avoiding all distractions on either side of his broad, straight road."[303] And art historian Robert Rey, in his monumental 1921 *La Renaissance du Sentiment Classique*, admired Seurat's "empirical control," explaining, "Each touch has the valor of a mathematical element. It doesn't require any more skill for a painter to choose and arrange than for a mathematician to register a correct figure."[304] This simple precision and control began even before Seurat touched his canvases, Rey delighted: "He installs his palette with the exact order of the spectrum, a discontinuous range of colors that corresponds the best way possible to the principal of spectral colors… Schematically, his palette offers a series of receding rectangles, presenting each color with its degradation towards white."[305]

François Walter noted that in the context of a society that favored reason over emotion, Seurat's mathematical technique was at home, inspiring people. He observed

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[302] Georges Bissière, "Notes sur l'art de Seurat," 16. "Il entend que toujours son cerveau dirige sa main, la conduise et la protégé contre les défaillances visuelles. Il sait ce qu'il veut, il veut savoir où il va et refuse de se laisser à aucun moment conduire par la toile."

[303] Georges Duthuit, "Seurat's System," *The Listener* 17, 421 (February 3, 1937), 210.

[304] Robert Rey, *La Renaissance de Sentiment Classique*, 114 "Chaque touche a la valeur d'un élément mathématique. Il ne faut pas plus l'adresse manuelle au peintre pour la choisir et la poser qu'il n'en faut au mathématicien pour inscrire au chiffre juste."

[305] R. Rey, ibid. "Il y installe, dans l'ordre exact du spectre, une rangée discontinue de couleurs prises dans leurs tubes et correspondant le moins mal possible aux principales couleurs spectrales. Schématiquement sa palette offrait à ce moment-là une série de rectangles distants, présentant chacun une couleur avec ses dégradations vers le blanc."

that all great artists deliberately erased signs of their technique — "The craft of the masters is made to be forgotten" — but he felt that Seurat was by far the most accomplished – "No painter has more explicitly divulged his method."[306] Perhaps the highest praise came from Christian Zervos who declared: "Rarely has one utilized a pictorial technique in such an adroit manner." Seurat's "manual effort, submitted to rules" is "a triumph of technique."[307]

In his 1923 article (separately published as a book the same year) Walter Pach admired Seurat for attacking technique like a scientist: "[Seurat's] paint is applied in detached brush-strokes, each color being planned so far in advance that it was possible for the artist to work almost as does the chemist, adding the requisite amount of pigment to each space."[308] Pach condemned nineteenth-century viewers who saw in Seurat "the decline of art into scientific impersonality," and justified Seurat's controlled method as "classical," connecting it an established tradition of rigor in art, a lineage that could be traced back to Poussin and Pisanello, through the Gothic period, and further still to the Greeks and Assyrians.[309] "Seurat's return to a schematic and intellectual style, as revolutionary as it seemed at the moment when sensation and sentiment were most in vogue, represents only a turn in a cycle of tradition to which his classical spirit made him adhere so strongly."[310]

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[306] Francois Walter, "Du paysage classique au Surrealisme – Seurat," *Revue de l'art* (1933), 166. "Pourtant le métier des maîtres est fait pout l'oubli. Ils effacent eux-mêmes les traces de leur effort… Nul peintre n'a plus explicitement que Seurat divulgé ses moyens techniques."
[307] Christian Zervos, "Un dimache à la Grande Jatte et la technique de Seurat," *Cahiers d'art* (1928), 363. "Rarement on a utilisé la technique picturale d'aussi adroite manière…un effort manuel soumis à des règles précises…le triomphe de la technique."
[308] W. Pach, "Georges Seurat (1859-1891),"168-69.
[309] W. Pach, ibid., 171.
[310] W. Pach, ibid., 169.

Others were drawn to the imitable in Seurat's mark. Seurat's de-emphasis of mark-making, his seemingly rote and uninspired touches resonated in an environment that was turning away from handcraft and embracing the cool impersonality of the machine. For many viewers, Seurat's marks not only reproduced the look of the mechanical, they also mimicked the social consequences of a rationalized system of work. Like the assembly line and its breakdown of labor into component parts, Seurat's repetitive touches were easily imitable and reproducible, the kind of automatic art within everybody's reach. In 1931, the British art writer, Clive Bell stated: "Seurat wished to devise a completely impersonal method of expression, appropriate to an age of equality to which he sincerely and generously looked forward, a method which could be learnt as one learns to use the typewriter," revisiting the nineteenth-century critics Charles Morice and Albert Aurier and their sentiment that pointillism wasn't a subjective art but an objective technique that anyone could master.[311] Unlike his predecessors, Bell found this reproducibility admirable, giving Seurat's work a transcendent and universal quality: "[Seurat provided]… for the citizens of an approaching social democracy a series of scientifically colored and graded discs, and a small collection of geometric forms. In these the maladroit but inspired artist of the future would find the synthetic equivalents of the forms and colors of nature."[312]

Similarly, Georges Duthuit, in his 1937 article "Seurat's System," praised Seurat for creating the "means not only of making his own work comprehensible to all, but also of enabling anyone to become a painter, by the simple method of following the rules which he laid down."[313] With "a good text-book of optics," anyone could learn the rules

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[311] Clive Bell, *An Account of French Painting* (New York, 1931), 205.
[312] C. Bell, ibid.
[313] Georges Duthuit, "Seurat's System," 211.

of neo-impressionism. (Recall that, in the nineteenth century, commentators like George Moore, had attacked Seurat for precisely the same reason.) Rey, writing sixteen years earlier, also found Seurat's method as "transmittable as a multiplication table…"[314] The simplicity of his work made it anti-elitist, an art within everyone's reach and a clear reflection of the Purist's declaration that "nothing is worthwhile which is not transmittable… anything of universal value is worth more than anything of merely individual value."[315]

This twentieth-century praise also attached to Seurat's manner of working. Duthuit compared him, admiringly, to an "automat," obeying "the mechanics of effects alone."[316] André Lhote noted that he was "classically mechanical."[317] And Hélion rejoiced that he was "mechanically composed."[318] In his 1935 book, *Seurat and the Evolution of La Grande Jatte*, the art historian Daniel Catton Rich suggested that Seurat had programmed his mind to respond to art in an inorganic way: "For the analysis he employed drawings and painted sketches *automatically* separating his observations into those dealing with line and tone and those having chiefly to do with color."[319] Working "automatically" implied minimal human intervention, a form of praise to artists and critics seeking emotional detachment. Waldemar George connected Seurat's work to mechanistic labor even more explicitly in his *Profits er pertes de l'art contemporain* (1933): "Seurat isn't only a calculator. He represents the new man, the man/machine,"

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[314] Robert Rey, "Seurat," *La Renaissance du Sentiment Classique,* 133. "Il semblerait donc que cet enseignement, aussi transmissible qu'une table de multiplication, aurait dû se prolonger et s'étendre de génération en génération."
[315] R. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger*, 82.
[316] Georges Duthuit, "Georges Seurat: Voyant et physicien," *Labyrinthe* (December, 1946), reprinted in *Représentation et Présence, Premiers Écrits et Travaux* (Paris, 1974), 324. "La seule mécanique des effects conduit une main impersonnelle…" and "…une automate transcript ces scenes incomparables…"
[317] A. Lhote, *Seurat* (Paris, 1922), 9. "On peut distinguer dans cette toile-type la mécanique classique…"
[318] J. Hélion, "Seurat as Predecessor," 10.
[319] Daniel Catton Rich, *Seurat and the Evolution of La Grande Jatte* (Chicago, 1935), 15.

who worked automatically, applying his regular strokes in a highly controlled and efficient way by eliminating all traces of the irregular or unexpected — his work more machine than human.[320] For George, Seurat "excluded artistic methods, consecrating the temporary triumph of the cerebral over the manual."[321]

THE RISE OF THE CONSTRUCTED FORM

For some twentieth-century commentators, Seurat's brushwork was not even the defining element of his legacy. In its place were the "wooden" and "hieratic" forms that his contemporaries had also mocked, but which the twentieth century largely embraced. With the new century came a new aesthetic, the Formalist enterprise, celebrating the supremacy of line and form as vehicles of pure expression.

In theory, the formalist work removed context and content from artistic emotion. Clive Bell explained that

> His [an artist's] problem is to create an expressive form that shall fit exactly an artistic conception. His subject may be what he pleases. But unless that subject has been carried to the high regions of art, and there, in a dry aesthetic atmosphere, sealed up in a purely aesthetic conception it can never be externalized in pure form.[322]

Seurat seemed to fit this paradigm perfectly. He was said to determine everything ahead of time, letting conception command the outcome of his pictures. "[In Seurat] all is calculated, all boldness weighed at length, all details categorized according to the role

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[320] Waldemar George, *Profits et pertes de l'art contemporain* (Paris, 1933), 33. "Seurat n'est pas seulement un peintre-calculateur. Il est l'esclave de sa mathématique. Il représente l'homme-nouveau, l'homme machine asservi à la loi de Taylor."

[321] Waldemar George, "Seurat et le divisionnisme," in *Les Albums d'art Druet X Seurat* (Paris, 1928), np. "Mais il exclut l'emploi des moyens artisans, et il consacre le triomphe temporaire de la peinture cérébrale et visuelle sur la peinture manuelle."

[322] Clive Bell, *Since Cézanne* (New York, 1922), 53.

they play in the ensemble," connoisseur and publisher Christian Zervos admired.[323] Seurat's focus lay in line and form. In *La Peinture Moderne,* Ozenfant wrote that the artist was "animated by the orthogonal spirit… geometry drove him."[324] He liberated his subjects from mundane worldly associations. Jean Hélion observed, "[Seurat] starts after nature… but once he has seized the elements he is interested in… he stylizes them beyond all resemblance."[325] Seurat transported, transcended. His paintings inhabited a "special world, having its own laws, its own life." Roger Fry concluded, "The syntax of actual life has been broken up and replaced by Seurat's own peculiar syntax with all its strange, remote and unforeseen implications."[326]

Critical to Formalism was the concept of construction. As mentioned earlier, many artists of the time, reacting to what they perceived as a lack of structure in painting, which paralleled a lack of order in the world, were trying to bring organizational clarity to their work by *constructing* formal elements into a coherent whole. A constructer was someone who was able to exert strict command over his work, using reason and logic deliberately until the elements of the work achieved "harmony." André Lhote wrote that construction: "gives precision and greater solidity to design, more body to objects, it makes our material world heavier than nature."[327] Picasso and Braque were constructors, too, as were Léger and Ozenfant. In Seurat, they perceived a predecessor, an architect and geometrician. Constructors like Seurat did not rely on the external world for stimulus, but looked instead to the "intrinsic qualities" of the canvas for motivation. Jean Hélion

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[323] C. Zervos, "Un dimanche a La Grande Jatte," 362. "Ici tout est calculé, toute hardiesse est longuement soupesée, tout detail est classé d'après le role qui lui est assigné dans l'ensemble."
[324] Amédee Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, *La Peinture Moderne* (Paris, 1925). "Seurat étaient animés d'esprit orthogonal…la géométrie les conduisait…"
[325] J. Hélion, "Seurat as Predecessor," 9-10.
[326] Roger Fry, "Seurat's La Parade," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* (December, 1929), 290.
[327] A. Lhote, *Seurat*, 5 "Construction…il signifie donner plus de solidité au dessin, plus de corpos aux objets, render plus pesant que nature cet univers materiel…"

explained, "Seurat builds, engineers his pictures," contrasting the Neo-Impressionist's approach to that of Cézanne, "Cézanne looks at the motif. Seurat looks at his canvas. Thus Cézanne deforms, while Seurat forms."[328] Seurat, at least for a while, took the mantle of modernism from Cézanne.

For many twentieth-century artists, like the Purists, the term "construction" also had political overtones. In the wake of World War I, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier explained the appeal of Seurat's constructive order:

> Seurat, without a doubt, wanted to express that which the old Greek geometricians knew, this harmony that our spirit supposes and imposes on things, this discipline that we would like to imagine the world obeying, this regulation of chance…that brings harmony. We love this in Seurat, we love order… That which counts is the law of construction.[329]

To Purists, the absence of construction was the embrace of impetuous whim. These were the individual impulses that led to disharmony and war. What could be more irrational and unconstructed than the reckless passions that led to World War I? If artists like Seurat could suppress the impressionistic tendency, and construct a stable and ordered canvas, perhaps in time the world would follow. This was, anyway, a suitable ideal.

Stability required an architectural command. While nineteenth-century artists often turned to music as their sister art, in the twentieth century music was increasingly regarded as too personal and romantic; architecture became painting's new ally.[330] For artists like the Russian Constructivists and Bauhaus, and for Purists and Léger, architecture was synonymous with rationality. A collaborative discipline, it offered a

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[328] J. Hélion, "Seurat as a Predecessor," 10.

[329] Amédée Ozenfant, "Seurat,"172. "…Seurat voulait sans doute exprimer par là ce qu'entendaient les vieux géomètres grecs, cette harmonie que notre esprit suppose et impose aux choses, cette discipline à la quelle il nous plait d'imaginer voir obéir le monde, cette regulation du hazard ou réel des phénomènes que nous amenons à une unite légale. Nous aimons cela; nous aimons l'ordre…ce qui compte c'est la loi de construction…"

[330] See R. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger*, 116.

haven from the self-absorption of the artist who worked alone, on impulse. In the coolness and command of Seurat, these painters found the spirit of an architect. "It was the endeavor of Seurat… to prove that architecture is the Mother of The Arts," Alexander Watt claimed.[331] "Technically it was a revolution against the Impressionists' procedure of painting."[332] While the spontaneity and freshness of the Impressionist approach had enjoyed favor in the late 1880s and 1890s, by the first decade of the twentieth century the Impressionists were attacked for their disorderly canvases, the result of passive recording. Many, like Watt, pointed to Seurat as a stellar point of contrast: he didn't copy, like the Impressionists; he made, he *built*.

Bissière argued that Seurat's architectural approach was the only viable route. "Seurat… never forgot that the only goal of painting is to make… living architectures, organized according to eternal laws and born from a superior mathematics."[333] Julius Meier-Graefe compared the construction of *La Grande Jatte* to a house, writing, "it consists almost entirely of straight lines that run into the picture instead of blending; they are like the beams of a house."[334] *La Grande Jatte* might even be a Gothic cathedral: "It deals with design in the third dimension, as does a cathedral," Pach observed, "indeed as we look at the perspective of tree-stems and the arch formed by the branches and foliage… it is to the Gothic architects that we are carried back."[335] Others went even beyond. Sweeney claimed that Seurat perceived the entire world in architectural terms. "The human figure, as well as other natural objects, were for him, first and always,

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[331] Alexander Watt, "Notes from Paris," 168.
[332] A. Watt, "Notes from Paris,"168.
[333] G. Bissière, "Notes sur l'art de Seurat," 16. "Seurat, lui, n'a jamais oublié que le seul but de la peinture était de faire des tableaux dans le sens que Ingres donnait à ce mot, c'est-à-dire, des architectures vivantes, organisées selon des lois éternelles et issues d'une mathématique supérieure où l'intuition et la raison se complètent et se soutiennet."
[334] Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art* (New York, 1968), 313; originally published in 1908.
[335] W. Pach, "Georges Seurat," 171.

elements of an architecture."[336] For Sweeney, Kahnweiler, and Barr, Seurat's interest in architecture pushed him towards "essential form." His reduction of subjects to geometric shapes was a harbinger of twentieth-century art.

More than ever, geometric forms infused culture in the early twentieth century. The emerging world, with its ball bearings and grids, its factories and interchangeable parts, offered proof of geometry's pristine efficiency. Geometric forms conveyed intellect and reason, construction and measurement.[337] They also touched something fundamental and basic, a shared and universal language. The potential of geometry to communicate universal themes motivated artists across the artistic panorama — from Picasso's and Braque's breakdown of form to Léger's tubular subjects; from Severni's mathematically rigorous study of shape (inspired by Seurat's theoretical example) to Theo van Doesburg's abstract geometric conceptions.

Bissière described the artist's paintings as "born from a superior mathematics," and German commentator B.E. Werner (who probably saw the 1928 exhibition *Seurat* at Berlin's Galerie Flechtheim) noted that the foundation of Seurat's pictures were "mathematical law."[338] Some claimed that Seurat's intense scrutiny and reduction of form were even more critical to the advent of abstraction than Cézanne's. André Salmon also recognized Seurat's significance to twentieth-century art and felt that Seurat's contributions were as vital as, and possibly greater than, Cézanne's. "Without Seurat we should not have had either Matisse or cubism, which does not derive entirely from

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[336] James Johnson Sweeney, *Plastic Redirection in 20th Century Painting* (Chicago, 1934), 9.
[337] R. Herbert, *Millet to Léger*, 165.
[338] G. Bissière, "Notes sur l'art de Seurat," (1920), 16. "Seurat…organisées selon des lois éternelles et issues d'une mathématique supérieure où l'intuition et la raison se complètent et se soutiennent." B.E. Werner, "Georges Seurat," *Die Kunst* 65 (February 3, 1932), 149. "…mit mathematischen Gesetzlichkeit aufgebaut."

Cézanne."[339] As Salmon noted, it wasn't until the twentieth century that artists and critics began to appreciate the role of line in Seurat's work. "We remain confounded that everything which Seurat said about 'la ligne' should for so long have remained a dead letter. The fact is that it needed the heart-rending effort of Cézanne, with his rude culture and his interest in the fourth dimension, quite to actualize Seurat, who till then was glorious but unappreciated."[340] For Salmon, Cézanne's revolutionary treatment of form and line was immediately apparent, yet Seurat's treatment was more nuanced. Artists needed to pass through Cézanne in order to understand Seurat.

According to Salmon, a few Cubists, including Braque, even kept reproductions of Seurat's work on the walls of their otherwise barren studios. *Le Chahut* became "one of the great icons of the new devotion" (Fig. 27).[341] Salmon linked Braque's interest in rhythmic structure to Seurat's experimentation with linear play, writing that "Chahut was among the perfectly pure materials that was found at the base of the Cubist edifice."[342] Cubist Juan Gris reported his affinity to Seurat's spirit of order, declaring: "In many ways I am one with Seurat."[343] According to art historian Robert Herbert, the Cubist group *Section d'Or* was named in honor of Seurat's use of a golden section in later paintings.

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[339] André Salmon, "La Revelation de Seurat," 42, "Sans la volonté de Seurat, nous n'eussions eu ni Matisse, ni le cubisme qui ne dépend pas uniquement de Cézanne."
[340] A. Salmon, "Georges Seurat," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* (September, 1920), 121.
[341] A. Salmon, "La Revelation de Seurat," 43 "…Chahut, l'une des grandes îcones de la dévotion nouvelle."
[342] A. Salmon, "Seurat," *L'Art Vivant* (1926), 525. "Le Chahut…est, parmi les matériaux partaitement purs qu'on trouve à la base de l'édifice cubiste…"
[343] Buchholz Gallery, bibl. 64 (1944), Lipchitz preface. Gris' self-declared affinity to Seurat was not without moments of doubt. In a December1915 letter to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Gris lamented that his work was meticulous and controlled, like that of Seurat's: "I never seem to be able to find any room in my pictures for that sensitive, sensuous side which I feel ought to always be there. . . I find my pictures excessively cold. But Ingres is cold too … and so is Seurat; yes, so is Seurat, whose meticulousness annoys me almost as much as my pictures…One must after all paint as one is oneself. My mind is too precise to go dirtying a blue or twisting a straight line." N. Broude, *Seurat*, 53. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris, His Life and Work* (New York, 1946), 212. Footnote 123

Kahnweiler saw a completely novel approach to form in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*:

> That which is strange, is that neither [Fénéon] nor any of Seurat's contemporaries remarked that [his] design, in this painting, tries to render volume by a sort of projection, instead of modeling with light, and that Seurat attacked a problem that would later occupy the Cubists.[344]

Seurat conveyed volumetric forms without chiaroscuro, the traditional device used to render illusionism. As a result Seurat's forms no longer functioned on a purely mimetic level, no longer mere reflections of the world. This method of rendering form in an abstract way would appeal to Cubists looking for a way to abandon old structures.

In the nineteenth century, only a few lonely critics had remarked upon these formal qualities. In 1886, Alfred Paulet commented, "Line is idea," to describe the difference between intellectual artists like Seurat and the emotional work of Impressionists.[345] But voices like Paulet's formed a small minority, overwhelmed by a nineteenth-century's preoccupation with Seurat's dots.

Now an ardent group of critics were beginning to reverse the focus, promoting Seurat's use of form and downplaying the significance of the dots altogether. Kahnweiler, for example, criticized viewers "inclined to see only Pointillism in Seurat," and argued that pointillism was "overrated," whereas Seurat, with his "coolness" and "impersonal execution" was "much more Ingres than Delacroix."[346] By evoking this well-known debate between line and color — epitomized by the struggle between linear Ingres and

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[344] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "La Place de Georges Seurat," *Critique* (1947), 56. "Ce qui est étrange, c'est que ni lui, ni aucune autre contemporain ne semble avoir remarqué que le dessin de Seurat, dans ce tableau, tente de rendre, par une sorte de projection, le volume, au lieu de modeler celui-ci au moyen de la lumière, et que Seurat s'attaque ainsi à un problème qui, plus tard, a beaucoup prèoccuper les Cubistes."

[345] Alfred Paulet, "Les impressionnistes," *Paris* (June 5, 1886). "La ligne, c'est l'idée." Quoted in Henri Dorra and John Rewald, *Seurat* (Paris, 1959), 160.

[346] D. H. Kahnweiler, "La Place de Georges Seurat," 56. "…c'est qu'on est trop porté à ne voir en lui que le 'Pointilliste.' "Lui-même, il me semble, s'apparente bien plus à Ingres qu'à Delacroix…" 55

coloristic Delacroix — and by placing Seurat on the side of line, Kahnweiler suggested that Seurat's major contribution to twentieth-century art was not perceptual or technical, but one of form. André Salmon agreed: "Seurat was the first of the great reconstructors… we must rule out of the artist's vocabulary the expression 'pointillism,' which is without value."[347] Just a few years later, in 1934, James Johnson Sweeney would call Seurat's pointillism "incidental," redirecting viewers to his "prime interest," the "structure of the picture as a whole."[348] And Alfred Barr insisted that even Seurat's followers misunderstood him, seeing him only for his technique. The core of Seurat lay in his reduction of form, or classicism, which could never be reproduced: "No amount of academic repetition can dull the perfection of Seurat's classicism."[349]

Seurat's cerebral reordering of nature, from chaos into order, was a pinnacle of human rationality. B.E. Werner noted:

> Seurat wanted nothing more than to liberate painting from empty virtuosity, from the escape of sensualism. He wanted to eliminate chance, which the Impressionists praised and put law in its place. He knew painting had a different job than just copying pretty lovely nature. He knew, at his core, that the lovely epidermis of the swimming, swaying light world had to be overcome for a bone structure, a solid construction, not to be left to subjectivity. He sought to free painting from cultivated living room art by bringing it back to lasting, monumental works.[350]

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[347] A. Salmon, "La Revelation du Seurat," 42-43. "Georges Seurat gut le premier des grands reconstructeurs…" "Avant tout, il faut rayer du vocabulaire artiste l'expression "pointillisme" qui n'a aucune valeur."

[348] J. J. Sweeney, *Plastic Redirection in 20th Century Painting*, 10, 7-8.

[349] A. Barr, *The Museum of Modern Art First Loan Exhibition*, 26.

[350] B.E. Werner, "Georges Seurat," *Die Kunst* 65 (February 3, 1932), 148. "Seurat wollte nichts anderes, als die Malerei aus dem leeren Virtuosentum, aus einem bequemen Sensualismus befreien. Er wollte die Zufälligkeit, die der Impressionismus hochgepriesen hatte, ausrotten und an ihre Stelle das Gesetz rücken. Ihm dämmerte etwas davon, daß die Malerei andere Aufgaben hat, als anmutig-liebenswürdige Naturausschnitte hinzustellen. Er wußte im Tiefsten, daß die reizvolle Epidermis einer schwimmenden schwankenden Lichtwelt überwunden werden mußte im Sinne eines Knochengerüsts, einer festen Konstruktion, die nicht einer individualistischen Willkür überlassen werden durfte. Er sah, daß es galt, die Malerei aus einer kultivierten Wohnstubenkunst zu ihren großen und ewigen Monumentalaufgaben zurückzubringen." There was an exhibition of Seurat's paintings in Berlin at the Galerie Flechtheim in 1928, which may explain the interest of this German critic.

The desire to dominate what André Lhote disparagingly called the "ceaseless bubbling" of the natural world was a central theme for many twentieth century artists, manifest in works like Picabia's *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* (Fig. 30). Evoking Baudelaire's famous *The Painter of Modern Life*, Léger argued that every age had its own beauty and that artists must draw from the world around. "The contemporary environment is clearly the manufactured and 'mechanical' object: this is slowly subjugating the breasts and curves of woman, fruit, the soft landscape — inspiration of painters since art began."[351] Works like Picabia's challenged the tradition of organicity in painting, combating the soft and gentle curves of the nude (a symbol of nature) with the geometric hardness of the mechanical world. Seurat predated all of these; before Picabia, before Léger, before Wyndam Lewis, or Charles Sheeler, there was Seurat.[352]

At the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* of the Grafton Gallery in 1912, Roger Fry defined the Post-Impressionists as "classic":

> I do not mean by Classic, dull, pedantic, traditional, reserved, or any of those similar things which the word is often made to imply. Still less do I mean by calling them Classic that they paint 'Nero at the Colosseum.' I mean that they do not rely for their effect upon associated ideas, as I believe Romantic and Realistic artists invariably do…The disadvantage of such an art of associated ideas is that its effect really depends on what we bring with us: it adds no entirely new factor to our experience…Classic art, on the other hand, records a positive and *disinterestedly* passionate state of mind. It communicates a new and otherwise unattainable experience…and though no one could find direct reminiscences of a Poussin here, his spirit seems to revive in the work of artist like Derain…It is because of this classic concentration of feeling (which by no means implies abandonment) that the French merit our serious attention. It is this that makes their art so difficult on a first approach but gives it its lasting hold on the imagination.[353]

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[351] Fernand Léger, quoted in Carolyn Lanchner, *Fernand Léger* (New York, 1998), 190.
[352] And before Seurat there was Ingres and Poussin. It was common to connect Seurat and other French artists, like Cézanne, to their French lineage. The perception of French artists as rationally clear and controlled had connotations of ethnic superiority, manifest in the earlier criticism of Maurice Denis.
[353] Roger Fry, *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (London, 1912), 28-29.

The truly classical artist was original, not because he mimicked Ancient Classical, Neo-classical, or Academic art, not because he held his feelings in check; to Fry, he was a classical artist because he created an entirely new space, free of the unruly limitations of the seen world. Others critics, like Lhote, made the same distinction: Seurat didn't come from the academic classical school in which composition was driven by nostalgia for Greek and Roman forms, he came from the *real* classical school that was driven by the desire to order chaos. According to Lhote, instead of adopting a simplistic, thematic classicism by incorporating archaic figures into an image (thereby becoming a "blind rabbit" of the Academy), Seurat's classicism was profound, traveling deep into the structure of the painting. Cousturier agreed: "Seurat didn't need to introduce Greek temples and figures to give his landscape gravity and style. It is the wholeness of his work that suggests a temple with a thousand pillars or columns, with its repeated verticals on clear horizontals."[354] Seurat's was not a partial classicism but a systemic and comprehensive one; he was the "most classical revolutionary painter of the nineteenth century," Lhote said.[355] His classicism was revolutionary because he didn't simply copy standard "classical" prototypes, recycling old forms and compositions, but instead was motivated by the profound desire to bring order through structural clarity. Lhote called Seurat's classicism "mechanical" to covey how intrinsic and automatic the need to order was in Seurat's work.[356] The true classical artist "exercised his power on disordered

[354] L. Cousturier, *Seurat*, 18. "Seurat n'a pas besoin d'introduire des figures et des temples grecs dans ses paysages pour leur donner de la gravité, du style. C'est son oeuvre entire qui nous suggère un temple aux mille piliers ou colonnes, avec ses verticals répétées sur des horizontals nettes…"
[355] A. Lhote, *Seurat*, 5. "Georges Seurat…est le plus classique des peintres révolutionnaires du XIXe siècle."
[356] A. Lhote, *Seurat* (Paris, 1922), 9. "On peut distinguer dans cette toile-type la mécanique classique, dans ce qu'elle a de plus rassurant et d'éternel."

forms from nature with the furor of a wild animal." [357] To Lhote, composition, the art of ordering nature's chaos, was the key component of classical art:

> Composition is the art of reuniting in a coherent bouquet of contradictory elements that tend, in the ever-changing world, to separate from one another or to fragment under the influence of light and of movement. It is the art of submitting the ceaseless bubbling, that is constantly reborn in the exterior world, to a brief moment of equilibrium, a miraculous respite.[358]

In his 1927 book *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*, Fry explained that the everyday world was inherently disorganized and without articulation, its forms blended together into a band of continuous data. The classical artist transformed this disorganization into spaces where order ruled:

> The intellect is bound to seek for articulations. In order to handle nature's continuity it has to be conceived as discontinuous; without organization, without articulation the intellect gets no leverage.[359]

By simplifying and reducing what he saw into structured masses of defined forms, the artist created space for the intellect to take hold. To Fry, Seurat's paintings were classical because they made room for the intellect. Of *La Parade,* he wrote:

> On the one hand, at the terminus a quo we have facts, the most minutely — one might say trivially — particular, facts of a photographic literalness, and at the other — at the terminus ad quem — something as abstract, as universal and as unconditioned as pictorial art … The syntax of actual life has been broken up and replaced by Seurat's own peculiar syntax with all its strange, remote and unforeseen implications.[360]

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[357] A. Lhote, *Seurat* (Paris, 1922), 6. "…exerçant leur puissance sur les formes désordonnées de la nature avec la fureur même de la vie animale."
[358] A. Lhote, ibid., 6-7. "La composition est l'art de réunir en une grebe cohérente des elements contradictories qui tendent, dans la vie courante, à se fragmenter eux-mêmes sous l'influence de la lumière et du mouvement. C'est l'art d'incliner le bouillonnement sans cesse renaissant de la vie extérieure vers un bref équilibre, une trêve miraculeuse."
[359] Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of his Development* (New York, 1927), 40.
[360] Roger Fry, "Seurat's La Parade," 290.

Like other classical artists, Seurat created forms of geometry and order. To the nineteenth-century commentator, this was emblematic of a cold soul. "Strip his figures of the colored fleas that cover them," one viewer bemoaned, "underneath there is nothing… Nothingness in a body that consists only of contours."[361] Yet for Robert Rey, this reduction — "he simplifies his forms and sometimes retains only the most characteristic curve" — was precisely what allowed for transcendence.[362] "In spite of his parasols and hats, his subjects become entities, "types," allegories."[363]

Others noted how Seurat's impersonality gave his work a universal appeal. His subjects were like "Assyrian Satraps" and "Nuremberg dolls," Duthuit described, echoing nineteenth-century critics who compared Seurat's figures to toy soldiers and automatons.[364] But unlike those critics, Duthuit found in Seurat's "curious detachment" the elements of "monumental art."[365] Another critic, Christian Zervos, also commended Seurat's "objective" vision: "The landscape becomes so pure, so exempt from materiality, so harmoniously clear… The people in *La Grande Jatte* are designed as architectures… the people of *La Grande Jatte* remain unreal."[366] And for the Museum of Modern Art's First Loan Exhibition of 1929, which included work by Seurat, Alfred Barr admired the "cold tonality," "silent objectivity," and "inhuman detachment" of Seurat's

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[361] Joris Karl Huysmans, "Chronique d'art: Les indépendants," *La revue indépendante* 3 (April 1887), 54. "Décortiquez ses personnages des puces colorées qui les recouvrent, le dessous est nul; aucune âm, aucune pensée, rien. Un néant dans un corps dont les seuls contours existent."

[362] R. Rey, *La renaissance de sentiment classique*, 119. "Il simplifie toutes les formes et, de chacune d'elles, il retient seulement la courbe la plus caractéristique…"

[363] R. Rey, *La renaissance de sentiment classique*, 134. "Malgré les chapeaux en pots de fleurs et les tournures, ses silhouettes de femmes deviendraient, pour un rien, des entités, des 'types' plastiques, des allégories."

[364] Georges Duthuit, "Seurat's System," *The Listner* (February 3, 1937), 210.

[365] G. Duthuit, "Seurat's System," 210. "The characters of a Parisian Sunday, whom he is constantly depicting, in style something between an Assyrian Satrap and a Nuremberg doll, are disposed according to pre-arranged geometric rules and seem curiously detached and remote, in spite of the glittering, iridescent atmosphere with which they are surrounded."

[366] C. Zervos, "Un dimanche," 362.

Une baignade, Asnières (Fig. 31). Roger Fry agreed that everything in the picture — boots, naked bodies, tossed clothes — enjoyed "unrelenting, unemphatic precision of statement. There is no bias whatever."[367] The methodical, unemotional approach lay in direct opposition to the emotion of Cézanne. Because Seurat was methodical, organizing his sensations into data, he was naturally able to achieve synthesis on the canvas. By contrast, Fry noted, Cézanne agonized over synthesis:

> For [Cézanne] … the ultimate synthesis of a design was never revealed in a flash; rather he approached it with infinite precautions, stalking it, as it were, now from one point of view, now from another, and always in fear lest a premature definition might deprive it of something of its total complexity. For him the synthesis was an asymptote towards which he was forever approaching without ever quite reaching it; it was a reality, incapable of complete realization.[368]

In his *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting* (1934), James Johnson Sweeney singled out Seurat as the nineteenth-century harbinger of synthesis:

> Seurat had struck out a new path. But his contemporaries were not yet prepared to follow. Cézanne … sensed that redirections were necessary, [but was] too deeply committed to [his] professional Impressionist technique to be able to effect the necessary fundamental changes. Seurat, though he remained an Impressionist technically, has, in all his mature works, managed to simplify his plastic themes. Cézanne, on the other hand, could not bring himself to choose between the broken color-surfaces of his Impressionist training and his leaning toward simple, solid forms. The result was that effect of tentativeness — that indecision — which we feel in his work: a constant wavering between analysis and synthesis — between a geometrical disorganization and reorganization in his volumes.[369]

To both Sweeney and Fry, Cézanne's difficulty synthesizing form was a natural consequence of the impressionist approach. The embrace of pictorial form was, in some fundamental way, at odds with the impulsive nature of impressionism, while Seurat's approach, stable and deliberate from the outset, lent itself readily to structure. Well into

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[367] Roger Fry, "Seurat," *The Dial* (September, 1926), 226.
[368] R. Fry, *Cézanne: A Study*, 3.
[369] J.J. Sweeney, *Plastic Redirection in 20th Century Painting*, 11.

the twentieth century, his brushwork, his forms, and his composition continued to be received as the "cool" and "mechanical" work of a scientist. Only the context of those words changed. The suspicion of technology in the nineteenth century had given way to an embrace of the "machine aesthetic" at the dawn of the twentieth, and in this new environment, Seurat found a new welcome: the machine man in the machine age.

Yet both were about to change again.

Chapter Three: The Personality of the Impersonal

THE MUTABILITY OF CONSENSUS

All conventions calcify with time. What begins as a proposition gains, through years, the sheen of truth, until eventually it can be difficult to remember just how the idea first took root. Indeed, it can be difficult to remember *that* the idea took root — that once, it was only an idea. Yet if we peel back the layers of conventional wisdom, we sometimes find surprising things: we may realize that our common assumptions have been questionable all along; we may discover a new truth altogether.

The first time I experienced Seurat's painting, as an undergraduate at Oxford fifteen years ago, I accepted without question the conventional wisdom that has surrounded his work for a century. Here was a mechanical artist, rigid in form and driven by science, devoid of the soulful passion I most admired in painting. Looking back, I cannot recall exactly how I acquired these precepts, but in the haze of learned perception, my experience of Seurat's painting focused on these qualities: Seurat was too precise, too immaculate. Seurat was not my kind of painter. Yet some years later, I stumbled upon a few of his preparatory "croquetons" for the large painting *Poseuses,* during a visit to the Musée d'Orsay (Fig. 32-34). Suddenly, I found my ideas about Seurat upended. In the shimmering decompositions of the croquetons, there was a nuance and variety, an improvisation of touch, that swept me up in the whorl of Seurat's art as I had never been, nor expected to be.

Over the next several years, I would continue to find myself drawn to Seurat, both for the delicacy and intimacy I found in his work, and for the strangely illicit joy of finding it — finding magic where only method was said to reside. Through my studies, I would come to understand more about Seurat's unusual reception; the changeability of his reception; the way his work had become a Rorschach test for two very different eras, a reflection of their ideas about mechanicity and technological advancement. But my surprise at the Orsay remained: the discovery that, for me, the word did not seem mechanical at all. It felt warm, intimate, gentle, human. The one overarching premise that linked those two different eras, seemed misguided in my own.

I was by no means alone. Even as I was beginning to question the conventional wisdom about Seurat's work, the convention itself was beginning to change. Over the last twenty years, a growing body of work has emerged that suggests my own perception of Seurat may be shared by many of the historians and artists I admire most. Even while I was breathing the air of conventional wisdom in the early 1990s (The New Yorker cover on June 18, 1990, showed pinpricks spilling from the hollow carapace of a figure in *La Grande Jatte),* the caricature of Seurat's marks as impersonal specks, and his forms architectural figurines, was already in decline (Fig. 35). If there was already a disconnect between the conventional view of Seurat in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the view emerging in the late twentieth stood opposite them both.

Of course, there is still (and may always be) a school of thought that regards Seurat's work as mechanical and cold. For example, while T. J. Clark re-directed discussion on Seurat to focus on subject matter instead of formal attributes, he nevertheless views the artist as essentially mechanical and rigid, characterizing his stiff forms and technique as a criticism of the petit bourgeois. Paul Hayes Tucker also relates Seurat's stiffness to his industrial surroundings, in the 1989 book *Monet in the 90s: The*

Series Paintings: "The isolated and interchangeable mannequins in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*…[are] essential to the industrial society Seurat is describing, driven as that society is by profit margins and technical developments, cheap labor and mass production."[370] In his 1990 book *Painting as Model*, Yve-Alain Bois described neo-impressionist forms *and* technique as impersonal: "No color or figure in the painting can be singled out: the impersonality of the divisionist technique concerns not only the brushstroke but the motif itself. It is an absolute pictorial democracy."[371] Luc Sante even compared Seurat's "adamantine dots" to "pixels," and as recently as 2007, the writer and art critic Francine Prose wrote, "Too often as we look at a pointillist canvas, some obstacle seems to intercede between the mind and the heart; perhaps it's the dazzle of technique, or the chill of theory, cerebration and scientific calculation."[372] But, in spite of views that continue to characterize Seurat as rigid and impersonal, another way of looking at Seurat has begun to gain currency over the last few decades, in which his work is neither mechanical nor scientific, but deeply and unfailingly intimate.

THE MODERN VIEW

The earliest glimpses of this view are surprisingly prescient. As far back as 1886, Symbolist Paul Adam described Seurat's marks as "infinitely varied" and "repeated to infinity," with "extraordinary diversity of nuance in hand."[373] Another Symbolist and

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[370] Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the 90s: The Series Paintings* (New Haven, 1989), 26.
[371] Yve Alain-Bois, *Painting as Model* (Boston, 1990), 44.
[372] Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines*, trans. and ed. Luc Sante (New York, 2007), xxvii.. Francine Prose, "Not the Seurat We Think We Know," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2007, D8.
[373] Paul Adam, "Peintres impressionnistes," *Revue contemporaine* 5 (April – May, 1886), 548-549. "…variée a l'infni, et qui constitue des diversités extraordinaires de nuanee dans une main, dans un membre, dans un pan d'étoffe."

contemporary of Adam, Gustave Kahn, also rejected the view of the artist as stiff and mechanical; instead praising Seurat for his "sure and personal technique."[374] Even Félix Fénéon — who promulgated the view of Seurat as a scientific technician — believed that the artist's regularizing technique had its own kind of personality: "Is it necessary to mention that this uniform and almost abstract execution leaves the originality of the artist intact, and even helps it?"[375] In the early twentieth century, among the throngs who admired Seurat for his architectural rigidity and impersonal formality, there was the occasional voice that strayed from that consensus: far from the traditional characterization of Seurat's marks as rote and uniform, Piet Mondrian (who himself was looking for an "impersonal" method) called Seurat's touch "painterly," contrasting it with the more regular "spots" of his neo-impressionist follower Jan Toorop (Fig. 36).[376] In his 1935 "Seurat and La Grande Jatte," Meyer Schapiro expanded on Mondrian's sentiment:

> For a long period after his death… Seurat was misunderstood and disparaged as a bizarre scientific technician without real artistic aims… his method was not seen correctly; it was criticized as mechanical and uniform, whereas a little observation would have revealed its genuine flexibility, the variety of strokes…[377]

Since Schapiro's defense, the perception of Seurat as a complex and personal artist, full of nuance has grown, but most especially in the last twenty years, until it now comprises a third holistic view of the artist, widespread enough to challenge the first two.

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[374] Gustave Kahn, "Au temps du pointillisme," *Mercure de France* 171 (May 1924), 6. "…d'une technique sûre et personnelle, calme et forte."

[375] Félix Fénéon, "Le néo-impressionnisme," (1886), in *Félix Fénéon: Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1970), 1:74 "Que cette execution uniforme et comme abstraite laisse intacte l'originalité de l'artiste, la serve meme, – est-il besoin de le noter?"

[376] James Johnson Sweeney, "Piet Mondrain," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (1945), 3. Mondrian's surfaces, of course, are practically brush-free; by comparison Seurat *is* painterly. Mondrian wanted to make universal "aesthetically pure" art, writing in 1914 that he was working to "get the human element out." One of the ways he did this was by rejecting expressive touch and choosing uniform and smooth surfaces. In spite of their lack of materiality, Meyer Shapiro claimed that Mondrian had a "delicate calligraphic touch," comparing it to "neoimpressionist units."

[377] Meyer Schapiro, "Seurat and *La Grande Jatte*," *Columbia Review* (1935), 9.

In this view, notably, Seurat's touch is no longer seen as particularly uniform. Under scrutiny, it reveals a degree of nuance, variety, personality, and even materiality, that was largely overlooked, or downplayed, by earlier critics. In his 2001, *Seurat's Drawings and Paintings*, Robert Herbert expanded upon Schapiro's view of Seurat's marks, "the famous dots are not a screen in front of his images. In fact, they are not even dots — they are instead small touches of paint in various shapes that shift and flow with the images and are interlocked with the underlying paint."[378] Paul Smith also argued that Seurat's work was fundamentally material, since his touches of paint remain distinct and never entirely "gel" in the eye.[379] The *apparent* goal of neo-impressionist immateriality was thwarted by material resistance, and this inability to fuse produced the effect of "luster" and "vibration," that Matisse once described as "jerky."[380] Fénéon similarly touched on the visual thrill in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, writing that "the atmosphere is transparent and singularly vibrant: the surface seems to flicker."[381] While Fénéon believed he was experiencing "optical mixture," (the blending of distinct touches as pure light), what he actually experienced was the failure of the marks to merge or blend. According to Smith and Herbert, this perceptual jostle — not the famous immateriality invoked by Signac and Fénéon — was Seurat's true intention, an effect he greatly admired in Delacroix and one described in the section "Vibration" of Blanc's *Grammar des Arts et Dessins*.[382]

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[378] Robert Herbert, *Seurat's Drawings and Paintings* (New Haven & London, 2001), 3.
[379] Paul Smith, " 'Souls of Glass': Seurat and the Ethics of 'Timeless' Experience," in *Seurat Re-Viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (University Park, 2009), 208.
[380] P. Smith, " 'Souls of Glass': Seurat and the Ethics of 'Timeless' Experience," 208.
[381] F. Fénéon, "VIIIe Exposition Impressionniste," in *Œuvres*, 1:37. "L'atmosphère est transparente et vibrante singulièrement; la surface semble vaciller."
[382] R. Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, 19. P. Smith, " 'Souls of Glass': Seurat and the Ethics of 'Timeless' Experience," 208.

Smith, Jodi Hauptman, and Richard Shiff argue that it was in Seurat's practice of drawing that he first learned to exploit the physicality of his medium, making it a key component of his work in paint. According to Hauptman, the over-emphasis on science and color theory in Seurat's work has had the unfortunate effect of detaching him from the physicality of his medium. Seurat's sensitivity to his media while drawing (not only conté crayon but also paper), also transfers to other media, where he often incorporates the ground, canvas, or wood panel into his final image. In the 1884 drawing study for *La Grande Jatte*, he lets the grid of Michallet paper perform a descriptive role in the image (Fig. 37). Hauptman observes, "The ground often becomes a crucial part of the composition…whether gentle or aggressive, whether on paper, panel, or canvas, resistance — the act of working against — is both a method and an attitude."[383]

Richard Shiff also notes the affinity among Seurat's media:

> A Seurat drawing shows the texture and color of paper as well as of conté crayon. A Seurat panel shows the analogous properties of wood as well as of paint. And a Seurat canvas performs in a parallel fashion.[384]

Seurat's drawings have historically been viewed as anomalies, remarkably and strangely different from his paintings in approach, sensation, and feel. In 1931, Claude Roger-Marx wrote that, in his paintings, Seurat showed himself as a "reflective methodical man, who moved forward with an infinite prudence…. a logician, without sentimentality…. indifferent to human adventure."[385] His drawings, Roger-Marx said, were just the opposite, revealing a "passionate" side and achieving a "mystery that the most lyrical

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[383] Jodi Hauptman, "Introduction," in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings* (New York, 2007), 11

[384] Richard Shiff, "Seurat Distracted," in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, 27.

[385] Claude Roger-Marx, *Seurat* (Paris, 1931), 11-12. "Cet homme réfléchi, méthodique, qui n'avance dans son art qu'avec une prudence infinie….ce logicien si peu héroïque, si peu sentimental…. cet homme que l'aventure humaine semble laisser si indifferent…"

minds trouble to reach."[386] Sixteen years later, Germain Seligman diagnosed Seurat with a "double personality" to explain his shifting approach to media: his paintings exhibited a "mental reluctance to reveal his inner self to the world," with his emotion "curbed to fit the parameters of grandiose and architectural composition."[387] Yet his drawings unveiled another side, "an emotivity and sensitivity that would remain unsuspected if we were to judge him solely by his paintings."[388] In his drawings, then, Seurat was "himself as he really is, denuded of all reserve, free to follow instinct, to express emotions."[389]

Even today, this divide between media, and between the rational and the instinctual, remains entrenched for many viewers. Francine Prose noted, in her review of the Museum of Modern Art's 2007 exhibit on Seurat's drawings, that while Seurat's paintings "rarely move us," his drawings call forth "an utterly different set of responses… shimmering, lambent, suffused by a remarkable combination of intimacy and mystery… [that is] profoundly affecting."[390] Prose's view of Seurat's personality as categorically divided into clear and separate chambers has clear echoes of earlier commentators, like Lionello Venturi and Roger Fry, who troubled to reconcile Seurat the scientist with Seurat the poet. For Venturi, the divide in Seurat's personality and approach resulted in jarring, irresolvable works, like *La Grand Jatte,* in which the "precision" of the figures collided with the "ecstatic feeling" of the landscape. "It is as though a crowd from a night

386 C. Roger-Marx, *Seurat*, 11-12. "Cet homme réfléchi, méthodique, qui n'avance dans son art qu'avec une prudence infinie, est un passionné….il transfigure la réalité et nous fait toucher un mystère que des cerveaux plus lyriques approchent à peine."
387 Germain Seligman, *The Drawings of Georges Seurat* (New York, 1947), 22, 33.
388 G. Seligman, *The Drawings of Georges Seurat*, 22, 33.
389 G. Seligman, *The Drawings of Georges Seurat*, 33.
390 F. Prose, "Not the Seurat We Think We Know," D8.

club had suddenly entered a church… we cannot help feeling the picture is a trick… method and theory have been coldly applied."[391]

In recent years, these qualities of order and disorder, structure and lack of structure, method and intuition, while conflicting and contradictory, have begun to cohere in discussion as the varied tools of collaboration and cohesion. In drawings like *Le pont-levis* (1882-83), Seurat masterfully integrates a variety of mark making — long, willowy, and light lines combine with forceful, dark ones, interspersed by blended scuffs — into a structured and unified whole, letting his paper assume a definitive and defining role in his images (Fig. 38). Smith explains that Seurat's mature paintings, from 1888 onward, are conceptually and physically similar to his drawings because there is a strong dialogue, an uncanny tension, between the coherent image (which reads as "continuous") and the irresolvable, abstract materiality (which read as "discontinuous"). It is this play between the continuous and discontinuous that makes Seurat's work so modern.

For Seurat, technical method and formal conception were inextricably bound. Some commentators, like artist Bridget Riley, have described this symbiotic duality, and suggest that a thorough analysis of Seurat depends upon examination of the minute pattern of touches and the volumetric forms that emerge from these dabs. Riley writes about this phenomenon in Seurat's early painting *Sous-bois à Pontaubert*, from 1881-1882 (Fig. 39):

> Close up, the painting seems to be quite flat, a little curtain of sparkles drawn across a formless density. But, to one's surprise, from further away another dimension appears. Hidden depths open up, soft volumes emerge … This elastic pictorial space produced by scrupulously organized colour and variable viewing distances is crucial. It facilitates a relationship between two extremes — the amorphous fabric and the monumental space it can generate. The Divisionist

[391] Lionelli Venturi, *Impressionists and Symbolists* (New York, 1950). Venturi admired Seurat's landscapes though.

> method breaks down and absorbs familiar distinctions of form and identity. By this it provides a conduit through which Seurat's particular and enigmatic sense of form and volume is evoked.[392]

For Riley, part of the intrigue of looking at Seurat comes from trying to pinpoint the moment when the abstract dots resolve themselves into legible forms — what Meyer Schapiro called the "mystery of coming-into-being for the eye."[393] Schapiro uses the word "mystery" because the transition from one mode of viewing to the other seems to take place magically, without notice.

Chuck Close also admires Seurat's drawings for their magic, marveling, "While you're aware of the making, the artist's hand has almost disappeared. They are like apparitions."[394] Close, perhaps more than most viewers, is keenly aware that the drawings are made with exacting precision, but even he is not quite sure how, so awed by the invisibility of the source. Richard Shiff compares Seurat's way of making to Close's paintings of photographs, which minimize his presence by using tools like an airbrush. In spite of their seemingly "continuous" surfaces, Close's paintings, like photographs themselves, exert material "interference" (Fig. 40). [395] Shiff asserts that both Close and Seurat stretch their medium to its breaking point — making and unmaking their images simultaneously, composing images but also revealing "gaps," the places where medium exerts itself.

Close's work has also been compared to Seurat's for other reasons: both artists build their images from smaller "units," and both are attuned to coloristic play. Yet Close dismisses this typical analogy: "I feel less kinship to Seurat than I do to Byzantine mosaics where an image is built out of discs of incremental marks — chunks of glass —

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[392] Bridget Riley, "The Artist's Eye: Seurat," in *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley* (London, 1999), 176-177.
[393] M. Schapiro, "Seurat: Reflections," *ArtNews Annual,* 29 (1964)*,* 21.
[394] Chuck Close in Patrick Pacheco, "Point Counterpoint," *Art and Antiques* 8 (October, 1991), 73.
[395] Richard Shiff, "Grave Seurat," in *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (University Park, 2009), 181.

that fit together. I want people to see what made the image. I like dropping crumbs along the trail like Hansel and Gretel. That's what all these paintings are about."[396] There are other, perhaps deeper, philosophic similarities in their practice of art making. Early on, Close's work was dismissed as inartistic because of its reliance on photography. In many ways, Close suffers from same kind of misdiagnosis that plagued Seurat. On the surface, his work seems rational, highly controlled, premeditated, deliberate. This is especially true of his early work. But, on closer inspection, the role of instinct and intuition, chance and play, materials and materiality, reveal themselves as central to the experience, and it is the balance between disorder and order that compels Close. ("The system seems totally mechanical and so systematized, but in fact the thing about limitations like these is that they free you to be more spontaneous and intuitive," he told Alex Hoyt of *The Atlantic* magazine in 2011.)[397] It is also this balance that Close finds in Seurat: the interplay between logic and irrationality; between rationality and intuition; between system and chaos. Recently, in front of *La Grande Jatte*, Close was struck by how the image he saw contradicted what he had learned about the artist:

> I was surprised. It seemed much more capricious and intuitive than I'd thought, especially given the crypto-scientific theories about him we learned in school. I believe Seurat set up his process as a method of operation and then was immediately swept away into an intuitive level.[398]

In his *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, Paul Smith argues that Seurat's scientific affiliation is based on the false assumption that Seurat told Fénéon his scientific intentions, and that Fénéon then published them. Rather, it was Camille Pissarro who provided Fénéon with information about the "science" of neo-impressionism.

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[396] Chuck Close interview with Lisa Yuskavage, "Chuck Close," *Bomb* 52 (Summer, 1995), 32.
[397] Alexander Hoyt conversation with Paul Simon and Chuck Close, April 12, 2011, *The Atlantic Magazine*.
[398] Chuck Close in "Point Counterpoint," 73.

> All in all therefore, Fénéon's insistence on the importance of science in Neo-Impressionism simply reflects Pissarro's concern that his ideas should be attributed to Seurat…. in the absence of information from Seurat, Fénéon arrived at his account on the scientific basis of Seurat's work by mapping Pissarro's ideas on it.[399]

Fénéon's claim that Seurat's color was organized around principles elaborated in Ogden Rood's *Scientific Theory of Colors* (1881) should be viewed skeptically, Smith cautions. While Seurat did copy a diagram of Rood's color circle, he never used Rood's complementary pairs, only the colors that Blanc considered complementary. If Seurat did know and deploy Rood's ideas on color, he would have used color in a manner consistent with the Young-Helmholz theory espoused by Rood; he did not, as his color is only consistent with the more intuitive system advocated by Blanc and Chevreul.[400] Georges Roque also clarifies that Seurat relied more on color theory than color science, and explains how only the latter involves testable, scientific facts about the behavior of light. Color *theory*, as described near the end of the first chapter, "Impersonal Seurat," is something far more interpretive and loose, a set of notions, even preferences, about how colors appear together. Smith concludes that, far from a scientist, Seurat "understood his work as idealist," though he acknowledges that this does not eliminate the possibility that Seurat may have incorporated scientific theories.[401] Even if Seurat considered his technique scientific, he may not have viewed it as impersonal. In his notes on Delacroix, one of the artists he most admired, Seurat wrote that his understanding of color was "the

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[399] Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven – London, 1997), 25-26.

[400] Paul Smith "Compared with Blanc and Chevreul, it's clear that Rood replaces Newtonian primaries of Red, Yellow, and Blue with Red, Green, Blue/Violet. Seurat noted Newtonian primaries in a document from 1887, strongly suggesting that Seurat learned his rationale for color from Blanc, whose chromatic rose was based upon Chevreul's color circle. Rood also had different complementary pairings. While Seurat always used Blanc's complementariness: R/G, B/O, Y/P (Blanc abandoned the Newtonian system in favor of Y Helmholtz)."

[401]

strictest application of scientific principle seen through a personality."[402] In another passage Seurat quotes Delacroix: "Sterility is not only a misfortune for art, it is a flaw in the artist's talent. Human production which does not flow abundantly is necessarily marked by strain."[403]

Sven Loevgren's characterization of Seurat as an artist who embraced the irrational for aesthetic reasons conflicted with entrenched notions of Seurat the scientist, first promulgated by Fénéon and passed down in texts like John Rewald's 1943 monograph *Seurat* and William Innes Homer's 1963 *Seurat and the Science of Painting*. In his 1959, *The Genesis of Modernism*, Loevgren refuted earlier characterizations of *La Grande Jatte* as rigid, impersonal, and scientific: "The composition presented by Seurat is in its entirety extremely individual… Here Seurat gives a view of the world in which the objective realities are changed to a strongly subjective contemplative picture with marked aesthetic aims."[404] In spite of the seemingly forged and impenetrable view of Seurat as detached and unemotional, Loevgren argued that the painter's choices were driven primarily by the emotional impact of aesthetics, *not* by theory or science. *La Grande Jatte* was rich in example. According to Loevgren, Seurat's decision to have one tree cast two shadows (in the middle foreground, tree with diagonal shadows) demonstrated his commitment to the "irrational" (Fig. 42).[405] While Robert Herbert later proved that this effect was originally based in observation (looking back through sketches of the painting, he noted that there was an obscured tree behind the visible tree,

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[402] Georges Seurat, *Notes sur Delacroix* (Echoppe, 1987), n.p. "C'est l'application la plus stricte des principes scientifiques vus à travers une personnalité."
[403] Georges Seurat, *Notes sur Delacroix*, n.p., "La stérilité, écrit Eug. Del., n'est point seulement un malheur pour l'art, c'est une tache au talent de l'artiste. Toute production d'un homme qui n'est pas abondant porte nécessairement un cachet de fatigue."
[404] Sven Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism: Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and French Symbolism in the 1880s* (New York, 1983; originally published in 1959), 63, 65.
[405] Ibid., 68.

accounting for the second shadow), Loevgren's point remains valid: Seurat eliminated the source of the double shadow, the second tree, for aesthetic *not* rational reasons, his "non-naturalistic style without rational foundation. It was used in order to attain a certain aesthetic effect, a fascinating rhythm of form" (Fig. 42).[406] An additional non-naturalistic effect is the diagonal orientation of the double shadow; all other tree shadows are horizontal. The spatial inconsistencies between the upper and lower parts of the picture (in the lower part of the canvas, Seurat created a deep, recessional space, while the upper portion flattened space, with its mass of foliage); the use of multiple viewpoints (in some parts of the picture we look down, while in others we look straight across); the contrast in tonality (the foreground is cool, yet the background is warm); the absence of physical and emotional connectivity between figures (emphasized by the exaggerated contrast between figure and ground) and the lack of proportionality in the figures (the foreground characters are dramatically different in scale, almost as if we are looking at them from the extreme right of the picture) *all* validated Seurat's prioritization of aesthetics over logic: "With this composition Seurat created tension of great artistic effect, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between the observed and the imagined. All the technical methods were applied to this end."[407]

With his silhouetted figures and regularizing technique Seurat "dematerialized" space, collapsing figure and ground, background and foreground into an undifferentiated meld.[408] While nineteenth-century critics like Huysmans perceived this lack of articulation as a defect, for Loevgren, Seurat's rejection of a three-dimensional, rational concept of space — modus operandi since the Renaissance — had its roots in emotion. In

[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid., 69.
[408] Ibid., 68.

Chahut, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn continued Schapiro's and Loevgren's view of Seurat as "unclassical," arguing that Seurat undermined the "classical" conception of space as ordered, hierarchically differentiated, and deeply recessional, by creating "discontinuous" and confused space. It was Seurat's artistic beginnings in the studio of Academic Henri Lehmann that compelled him to overturn traditional depictions of space: "The goal of Seurat was this: that his contribution to the dislocation of classical space was stimulated by his academic procedure," Lebensztejn noted.[409] Seurat's *Chahut* is full of spatial contradictions and inconsistencies. While the bassist and conductor are viewed horizontally, the spectator in lower right conjoins multiple perspectives: we look up at his nostrils, as if seeing them from below, while looking down on his hat, as if seeing it from above. We see the first dancer's neck and nose from below, but we see her body frontally, and the heads of the next three dancers are close together, but the spacing of their legs suggests that they are much further apart. We look across at the dancer's faces, but down on their legs. And while the height of the foot of dancer one and two seems correct, the legs of three and four are impossibly above their heads (Fig. 27). Seurat (along with Cézanne) was a predecessor to the Cubists; Lebensztejn points to *Chahut's* spatial disorientation and confusion as a precedent. But, not in the way proposed by earlier critics, like Salmon and Hélion, who pointed to Seurat's reductive and constructive work as cerebrally akin to the Cubist exploration of geometry and space. Seurat was more of a Cubist in the way implied by Shapiro; in a 1954 symposium on color, Schapiro pointed to Seurat's "homogenous" treatment of formal elements — line, color, and touch given equal roles and structurally inseparable — as conceptually similar to Cubist collage, which treats all materials in a similar manner, breaking down

[409] Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Chahut* (Paris, 1989), 106. "Le proper de Seurat est plutôt ceci: que sa contribution à la dislocation de l'espace pictural classique est stimulée par sa procédure academique."

traditional spatial distinctions (Loevgren's "dematerialization"). For Lebensztejn, it was Seurat's fragmented, discontinuous, and confused space that foreshadowed the Cubist's own experimentation with spatial irrationality:

> With Seurat it seems that his small units should form a continuous and rational space, but instead they result in difficult to explain distortions. The system of discontinuities is itself broken, heterogeneous. We understand that Seurat was, with Cézanne, the master of Cubist painting.[410]

Lebensztejn's "heterogeneous" is Schapiro's "homogeneous." Loevgren also called Seurat's color "monotonously uniform" agreeing with the painter's most vehement critics (Gauguin, Huysmans, Renoir) but far from sterile, he argued that this abstract approach was rooted in the artist's concern for emotional resonance, not perceptual resemblance.[411]

Further detaching himself from the history of scholarship, Loevgren described Seurat's approach as philosophically and aesthetically united with van Gogh and Gauguin:

> His endeavors to delve deeply into the disparate elements of existence in order to create a new synthesis with intuitive clarity were to him — as to many of his contemporaries — an agonizing pilgrimage toward the illusive autonomous work of art, towards a unique world of symbols in which the artist, by virtue of his knowledge and poetic power, is the supreme ruler.[412]

With its marked interest in discontinuity and rhythm, its detachment from the everyday world, its lack of logic and tension, and its abbreviated and synthesized forms, Seurat's work revealed his allegiance with the Symbolist movement coursing through the Parisian avant-garde in the mid 1880s.[413] Loevgren even compared the structure, pace, and

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[410] J.C. Lebensztejn, *Chahut*, 107 "Chez Seurat, les petites unités semblent devoir former des figures et un espace continus et raisonnables, mais ils sont travaillés par des distortions difficiles à exliquer. Le système des discontinuités est lui-même rompu, hétérogène. On comprend, que Seurat, ait été, avec Cézanne, le maître à peindre du cubisme."

[411] S. Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism*, 70.

[412] S. Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism*, 70.

[413] S. Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism,* 69.

sentiment of Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* with the symbolist Mallarmé and his prose poem *Le Nénuphar Blanc*: both painting and poem offered a blend of reality and dream, mystery and symbol, monotony and abstraction. In *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, Paul Smith also connects Seurat's work to neoplatonic idealism and literary symbolism, seeing in his work strong ties to Wagner's lyrical and synthetic musicality, and in his recent article "Stillness and Symbolism," Smith points to the stasis in Seurat's paintings as a reflection of the symbolist concern for timelessness, specifically with the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.[414] In the nineteenth century, those who tried to connect Seurat to Symbolist theory, like the Symbolists Gustave Kahn and Émile Verhaeren, were left by the wayside. Even Fénéon's voice on this matter was unheard: while his texts were used as authorizations of Seurat's rigid commitment to science, his description of Seurat's work as invoking a "higher sublimated reality" fell off the radar.[415]

When Fénéon coined the term neo-impressionism in September of 1886, he made a judgment based on his assumption that Seurat's technique was an improvement, or even a canceling out, of Impressionism. With his neo-impressionism, Seurat was updating the movement, making it more modern and relevant. The Impressionists were finders, copying a world already made; whereas Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists were makers,

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[414] P. Smith, "Seurat and the Ethics of 'Timeless' Experience," in *Seurat Re-Viewed* (University Park, 2009).

[415] While a small group of Symbolists championed Seurat as a master of synthetic line and emotional color, the consensus view buried this interpretation. Gauguin felt no symbolist allegiance, dismissing Seurat as a slave to the mechanics of science, his paintings no more than the rigid dabbles of a cold chemist. Nineteenth-century symbolist critic Albert Aurier chastised Seurat for his overly rationalized commitment to science and the material world, his work far from the emotive, synthetic, and symbolic power of artists like Gauguin and van Gogh. In the twentieth century, Alfred Barr aligned Seurat and Cézanne to reason and logic and Gauguin and van Gogh to emotion and instinct, maintaining the established divide among the artists. Even among those who felt that Cézanne and Seurat were the fathers of abstraction, the two artists were perceived as emotionally estranged (Hélion, Kahnweiler): Cézanne passionate; Seurat detached.

conscientiously re-ordering nature into a new abstracted system.[416] As the art historian Martha Ward observed, the prefix "neo" in conjunction with an art movement — e.g. neo-classicism — was used at that time to suggest the revival of a movement long finished. To pair "neo" with impressionism, a movement that in 1886 was alive, was a strategic way of suggesting that impressionism was obsolete.[417]

In the early twentieth century, Seurat's detachment from the seen and from perception was admired — Duchamp praised Seurat for not being "retinal" — and he was admired as an artist who, above all, valued *idea*.[418] In 1935, Meyer Schapiro was one of the first to contend that Seurat was not as anti-naturalistic as he had been described, arguing that the twentieth century's formalistic view of Seurat as an intellectually aloof artist was at odds with a painter who was "scrupulously attentive to nature."[419] Schapiro noted that art historians, like Daniel Catton Rich, who claimed that Seurat's "architectural" work was un-naturalistic (and therefore rigid) had been blind to the "naturalistic and informal aspect" of the artist's work.[420] He observed that no matter how rigid the picture and people *seem* in *La Grande Jatte*, the overall effect is that of a crowd, corresponding more with our experience of the world as chaotic and free than with our structured and impersonal notions of classical order. Schapiro also pointed to Seurat's distortion of spatial relationships as decidedly unclassical (Clement Greenberg also touched on this in 1951). According to Schapiro, Seurat may be "classical" in some other

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[416] "Alone among the crowd of mechanical copiers of the outside world, these four or five artists, achieve the sensation of life itself: this is because objective reality is for them only a pretext for the creation of a higher, sublimated reality ..."

[417] Martha Ward, Pissarro, *Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, London, 1996), 58.

[418] Marcel Duchamp interview with Dore Ashton, "An Interview with Marcel Duchamp," *Studio International*, 171 (June 1966), 245.

[419] Meyer Schapiro, "Seurat and 'La Grande Jatte'" *Columbia Review* 17 (1935), 9.

[420] M. Schapiro, "Seurat and 'La Grande Jatte,'" 11.

sense, but he was not conventionally classical; that is he didn't fit into the definition of classicism as anti-naturalistic, depersonalized, and highly rationalized — the very definition intended by Rich and others such as Lhote, Rey, Fry, Pach, and Coustrier.

Pointing to Seurat's informal preparatory sketches, Robert Herbert and Paul Smith followed up on Schapiro, arguing that Seurat's work was actually much more based in sensation than previously believed. More recently, the scholar Michelle Foa comments that the historical focus on a handful of Seurat's most geometric and rigid paintings — *La Grande Jatte*, *Poseuses*, *Parade de cirque*, *Cirque* — has resulted in a limited understanding of the artist as rigidly formal (Fig. 1, Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig. 28). But, when you look at the entirety of his output (his drawings, croquetons, and seascapes) his work reveals a deep concern for vision, sensation, and perception.

THE HEIR

The artist Bridget Riley argues that, like the Impressionists, Seurat was deeply sensitive to perceptual issues. (Meyer Schapiro suggested that, because of their abstract, non-representational nature, the marks of the Neo-Impressionist were actually *more* effective than those of the Impressionists at recreating "pure sensation.")[421] But, while Monet recorded his impression of a visual event in the world, Seurat's paintings were records of the visual happenings unfolding right in front of him, on his own canvas: "Monet goes with perception, looking along its sightlines as it were, whereas Seurat

[421] See his discussion "Le Contraste Simultané en Peinture," with M.Francastel, M. Habasque, Mucha and Meyerson in *Problèmes de la Couleur*, 249. Also see Clement Greenberg.

looks into perception and shows it to be the activity which produces what it sees."[422] So while Monet would paint the effect of flickering light on water, or the strange luminosity of a dense morning fog — actual events in the world — Seurat did not copy a specific event from nature. Seurat's paintings *were* about sensation, but the sensations he described were not linked to an event. It was never his goal to capture the transient effects of a sparkle or shimmer, but to record the sensation that occurred in the narrow space between painter and canvas, the sensation that emerged from his engagement with process. Seurat's stimulus was his painting. His painting was his event — his happening. His decision to place a dab of blue next to green might result in a kind of visual thrill, a jump, a jitter, a flicker that had a similar effect to a sensation from the world.

Despite the consensus, and Seurat's own protestations — despite even his own purported efforts to apply "only my method, that is all" — the mystery of sight is woven into his work. Riley's view of Seurat contrasts with earlier interpretations of Seurat as an artist who prioritized conception over perception (Fénéon, Kahnweiler, Salmon, Hélion, Barr, Ozenfant). The fact that he may not have recognized this or chosen to highlight it when speaking of his work does not diminish from the fact of experience: instead of adhering to the preconceived scheme that he set out for himself, where every step was rigidly determined ahead of time, Riley feels that Seurat arrived at something quite different:

> He had a dream of an art which could be verified and calculated. But his actual painterly achievement turned out quite differently. It seems to me that when working on his great masterpieces, 'La Grande Jatte' and 'Les Poseuses,' he was depicting not so much an external reality as his own structure of sight. He would, naturally, have experienced such a projection as some curious reflection thrown up on the canvas before him and to cope with this genuine phantom as it emerged

[422] Bridget Riley, "The Artist's Eye: Seurat," in Robert Kudielka, *Eyes Mind: Bridget Riley* (London, 1999), 181.

> must have been quite difficult. His later work looks to me as though he became more and more upset by, perhaps even disappointed in, some aspects of the visual events he had so brilliantly created.[423]

By responding to the reality of his canvas, Seurat's theory was overtaken by something much more compelling and innate. Chuck Close suspects that intuition played a big role. Looking at his painting, we see Seurat's "structure of sight" — that is how he saw as he was painting, how every touch, every color choice was informed by what preceded it, sweeping away all precepts.[424] In the process of painting, Seurat revealed the enigma of his personal vision. Riley is drawn to Seurat because he captured the tension in vision between knowledge and sensation:

> The elusive is made present. The fugitive caught and stilled…Instead of enlisting the services of sight as they are habitually balanced, he draws out the unknown in an extreme, unexpected manner. Such an intent (INTENSE?) scrutiny of phenomena, and the painting out of perception, step by step, as though it had been mapped, build up together a perfect hallucination. The unfathomable appears in the guise of total visibility. His astonishing achievement is to have exposed the enigma of reality as within reach of perception…Seurat looks *into* perception and shows it to be the activity which produces what it sees.[425]

In paintings like *La Grande Jatte*, *Le pont de Courbevoie*, or *Les Poseuses* Seurat undermines the certainty and stability of figural knowledge by focusing on the "enigma" and "elusive" quality of perception (Fig. 1, Fig. 43, Fig. 7). In these paintings Seurat captures that which usually goes unnoticed: the visual events or happenings, the mysteries of sight, that take place on the "periphery" of vision: visions like shimmer on water, the feel of a dense fog, the elusiveness of color. Describing the kinds of sensations

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[423] Bridget Riley, *Dialogues on Art*, ed. Robert Kudieklka (London, 1995), 51-52

[424] Shiff equates Seurat's intense relationship with materials to "probing," and postulates: "Each of his touches of the brush or crayon was a thought that required an additional material trail, with consequences that demanded further thought. His degree of focused attention may well have been distracting and even alienating: a case of aesthetic vertigo. His practice compounded so many little bits of experience with line, color, and tone that extreme results became his norm." See "Seurat Distracted," In *Georges Seurat: The Drawings* (New York, 2007), 18.

[425] Briget Riley, "The Artist's Eye: Seurat," 181.

that Seurat depicts and the same kinds of sensations that she seeks in her own work, Riley notes:

> Sensations — visual sensations — defy attention, the moment they are focused upon they evaporate; they are extremely elusive things. We all have them, all day long. But mostly our lives don't allow us to actually 'let them in' in their original state. But if you walk through a landscape, you absorb sensations of shadowy parts, massed forms, open spaces, hard rocks, things above you, the earth beneath — they're not only visual sensations, they are sensations which take in the freshness of the day, a wind that may be blowing, clouds, rain in the air, a whole variety of accompanying feelings — these are so fleeting that you can't separate them and nor do you want to. But at the end of such a walk, you feel something has happened, although you can't actually name it.[426]

As Riley states, in Seurat's most beautiful paintings his images are "just on the verge of being incomprehensible."[427] For Riley, Seurat constructs a new visual reality informed by the kind of sensations that evade us, the elements of sight that we don't process into experience.

Something *is* happening, perceptually, in Seurat. For Smith, Seurat undermines his famously described stasis in subtle but very personal ways,

> Seurat uses several clues to convey stasis, but what makes his work distinctive is that, alongside these, he deploys forms and textures that suggest kinds of movement that are either slight or displaced — in the sense that movement does not quite belong to objects in the normal way.[428]

In *La Grande Jatte*, for example, Seurat's subjects *seem* rigid but the slight irregularity of their contours and the lack of symmetry in the painting suggest movement, so there is a gentle but evident push and pull between movement and stasis. Richard Shiff agrees that Seurat's paintings are alive in movement, defying the critical stillness ascribed to them.

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[426] Bridget Riley in interview with Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Dialogues on Art* (London, 1995), 71-72. For an excellent discussion of Riley and sensation see R. Shiff, "Bridget Riley: The Edge of Animation," in *Bridget Riley* (London, 2003).
[427] Bridget Riley interview with James Roberts, "Visual Fabric," *Frieze: contemporary art and culture* (Sept-Oct, 1992), 20.
[428] Paul Smith, "'Souls of Glass," 207.

For Shiff, it is Seurat's attention to his medium that activates — the way in which gridded paper, ridged panel, or textured canvas assert themselves as principal parts of image and the way in which Seurat's marks respond to, mimic, and acknowledge his support: his image "quivers with the life of its medium."[429]

A close look at Seurat's work reveals how varied and non-mechanical his marks really are. Whether highly distinguished and individual, or smaller and more uniform, they work together to create a unique reflection of his own eye, aesthetic, and sensibility. As discussed earlier, Seurat read, admired, and to some extent modeled his work after the writings of Charles Blanc. In his *Grammaire des arts du dessin* Blanc comments on the value and importance of expressive touch:

> To finish is… to animate by some expressive touches that give an air of frankness and liberty. To finish is to remove by a few light, elegant strokes of the brush the insipid neatness, the uniformity that communicates to the spectator the ennui it must have caused the painter… That the touch ought to be varied… goes without saying… the touch of the painter will always be good if it is natural, that is according to his heart.[430]

Riley has explained Seurat's understated touch, precisely the aspect that earned his comparisons to a machine, as being instead the root of his expressive power. "I love… his refinement and reticence," she writes:

> …it is little short of thrilling to realise that so sure is Seurat of what he is doing that he *can* eliminate all that is not essential. (It is not difficult to imagine how other artists might have grasped at this or that incidental in such a situation). At the same time he is *adding*, creating a richer if more exacting field from which he can fabricate even more complex mysteries with greater precision.[431]

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[429] Richard Shiff, "Seurat Distracted," 29.

[430] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, 545-546. "Finir…c'est l'animer par quelques touches expressives qui lui prêtent un air de franchise et de liberté. Finir, c'est ôter, par quelques coups de pinceau légers, vifs, éloquents parfois, cette propreté fade, cette uniformité, qui communiqueraient au spectateur l'ennui qu'elles ont dû procurer au peintre…Que la touche doive être variée…cela va sans dire…la touche du peintre sera toujours bonne si elle est naturelle, c'est-à-dire si elle est selon son cœur."

[431] Bridget Riley, "The Artist's Eye: Seurat," 176.

Echoing Schapiro:

> [Seurat's] method is perfectly legible; all is on the surface, with no sauce or secret preparations; his touch is completely candid, without that 'infernal simplicity of the brush' deplored by Delacroix. It approaches the impersonal but remains in its frankness a personal touch.[432]

Seurat resisted playful meandering — he didn't indulge in fancy hand-work, but instead hewed to an honest method that concealed nothing. Camille Pissarro's early comments on the freshness of neo-impressionism (before he lost his taste for it), between 1886 and 1888, bring clarity to Riley's view of Seurat. To Pissarro, the buildup of paint on canvas, used by artists like Monet, created a barrier between artist and motif as the thick and muddled play of paint interfered with representation itself. (On Monet, he wrote: "the impasto is so thick that an unnatural light is added to the canvas, you can hardly conceive how objectionable this is to me."[433]) In contrast, the neo-impressionist mark eliminated extraneous matter, giving a cleaner and more clear portrait of both the depicter and the depicted. Demonstrating the seriousness of his commitment, Pissarro stripped down his brushwork to its most essential in his gouache fan *Harvesters* (1886); he rendered straightforwardly, perhaps more straightforwardly than any other Neo-Impressionist, his surface thinly painted, without discernable residue or build up, the background wash flat, so that each stroke on top is distinct and "legible," without jumbling from the preliminary layer (Fig. 44).[434] It is as if Pissarro felt that he could be more sincere by reducing the

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[432] Meyer Schapiro, "New Light on Seurat," 44.

[433] See Pissarro to Lucien, 15 May 1887, in *Correspondance*, 2:167. "…l'exécution grossière…où le empâtements sont tellement en relief qu'une lumière factice vient s'ajouter à celle de la toile; tu ne saurais croire combien cela m'est désagréable, avec un ciel balayé, mince; non, je ne puis accepter cette façon de comprendre l'art."

[434] Martha Ward writes of Pissarro's 1886 gouache on paper fan, *Harvesters*: "Perhaps nowhere else is neo-impressionism so readily accessible for the viewer's understanding….the surface is thin and the underpainting flat. So the 'points' read as just that, as small flecks of color, congregating across a scene that, as a landscape, seems to have more substance than they. Pissarro is close to Seurat in *La Grande Jatte* but less moderate by virtue of his insistence on rendering the method plain, obvious, even crude." See M. Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism*, 77. Pissarro's undifferentiated and light background wash was

materiality of paint. The relationship between touch and artistic involvement for him (and later, Riley) was inverse: the less visible the touch, the more involved the artist. By transcending superficial whims, manifest in materiality, the artist felt he was coming out of hiding, his real personality showing through medium.[435] Briefly, Pissarro even felt that his neo-impressionist paintings were more expressive than his earlier impressionist ones. Through marks that were stripped clean of "romantic extravagance," Pissarro felt that he was more "free to express" than he had been as an Impressionist.[436] As he put it, through the "refined" technique of "surprising sweetness" he could be more "sincere," "calm," "simple," and "faithful."[437] Although his enthusiasm for the technique waned by 1890 — he eventually rejected its lack of expressive spontaneity — for the rest of his career he was haunted by the question of how to achieve the purity and simplicity he approached in his neo-impressionist canvases. Nearly a century later, Riley, with her touch-free paintings, finds no such conundrum (Fig. 45). She locates in Seurat the clearest precedent.[438]

Seurat reduced, but as Riley suggests, he also expanded and enriched, transforming his clean and crisp surfaces into complex and mysterious visual fields. Richard Shiff explains the merits of understated touch, "Pointillist paint application, the

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unusual; Seurat, by contrast, painted his background with broad cross-hatched strokes, so that marks placed on top of the preliminary layer meshed with it, making it harder to detect single strokes. Later, Seurat eliminated his underpainting.

[435] A conversation that Riley had with Isabel Carlisle is relevant. Carlisle: "From the first painting onwards you have used assistants in the execution of your art…How concerned are you with liberating your art from the working process and the visible brushstroke? Riley: "I am not at all interested in any sort of liberation from the working process. Quite the reverse. Holding myself at a certain distance enables me to be more engaged, not less…" "Bridget Riley in conversation with Isabel Carlisle," in *Bridget Riley* (1998), 8.

[436] Pissarro to Lucien, 10 January 1887, in *Correspondance* "… un art très savant et me permettant d'être très sincere, ce qui n'empêche pas d'être très artiste…"

[437] Pissarro to Lucien, 30 July 1886, in *Corresondance*, 2:64. "Si tu vois comme cette peinture [Temps gris] est *calme* et *simple*, assise, ``a côté de l'échevèlement romantique de mon tableau des *Vaches*." Pissarro to Lucien, 30 December 1886, 2:92-93 : "…c'est curieux, le travail au point, avec le temps, la patience, petit à petit on arrive à une *douceur étonnante*…"

[438] I first learned of this connection in Richard Shiff's "Grave Seurat," *Seurat Re-viewed.*

handling, became transparent in relation to the thoughtful, emotionalized image it conveyed. It led to meaning by removing the distractions of technical flourish and stylistic affectation."[439] Although the dots clearly are not as uniform as some of Seurat's commentators claim, the illusion of sameness is in large measure what makes Seurat's brushwork so honest and fresh. Instead of complicating technique with display, Seurat condensed, refined. As viewers, we are welcome to appreciate the technique with a discerning eye, but we are also free to see through the medium, to the image, the space within. The decision to grant this freedom to viewers is not only part of Seurat's distinction as an artist; it is what makes his work unique. It is what makes Seurat personal.

Riley never touches her final, exhibition paintings; assistants paint for her.[440] Instead she conceives, composes, and directs the making. Commenting on this unusual practice, she explains:

> I wanted the actual content of the paintings to come through unchecked by any kind of touch, so that you could see the strength and weakness without any barrier. I actually wanted a painting to be an extremely naked thing and to be able, for right or wrong, to make such clear decisions that there could be no doubt and no evasion…It's part of the meaning of the work that I don't want to interfere with the experience of what can be *seen*.[441]

Detaching herself from making brings clarity and, contrary to expectation, allows Riley to get *more* involved with process:

> Holding myself at a certain distance enables me to be more engaged, not less…It seems to me that it is in making the decisions rejecting and accepting, altering and revising — that an artist's deeper, real personality comes through. Pollock is

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[439] Richard Shiff, "Grave Seurat," 169.

[440] For an engaging discussion of Riley's approach and its connection to Seurat's own process, see Shiff, "Grave Seurat," in *Seurat Re-Viewed* and "Bridget Riley: The Edge of Animation," in *Bridget Riley* (London, 2003), 89-90.

[441] Bridget Riley in an interview with Michael Craig-Martin, "Practising Abstraction, Talking to Michael Craig-Martin," in *Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art* (Zwemmler, 1995), 60.

> unmistakably there in his finest drip paintings. But with his tin and splatter stick he most explicitly avoids any direct physical 'touch.' And Mondrian, too, is very much Mondrian in his paintings through the total exposure of the decisions he makes. His meticulously painted surfaces reflect his belief in the work of the spirit as constructor and composer.[442]

Seurat was also present, in spite of his gentle and quiet touch. Riley admires and relates to Fénéon's 1886 characterization of Seurat's hand as "numb," not only because she feels that he aptly describes Seurat but because she hopes to approximate the same kind of detachment in her own work:

> Each part of his immense painting, *La Grande-Jatte*, demonstrates the monotonous and patient spots, a tapestry… here, in effect, the hand is useless, it is impossible to cheat; no place for moments of bravura; the hand is numb — on an ostrich, a bale of straw, a wave or a rock the movement of the brush remains the same.[443]

Fénéon (and Riley) found Seurat's straightforwardness appealing: "the ability of the hand [was] a negligible question, almost all the material difficulty of facture is swept aside."[444] The "almost abstract uniformity of execution" didn't rely on sleight of brush to captivate the viewer's attention: all that the pointillist needs is "to be a painter, not a prestidigitator."[445] The strength of Seurat's paintings came through regardless of touch, because his work was unmediated by expressive handling, his paintings remain pure:

> Is it necessary to mention that this uniform and almost abstract execution leaves the originality of the artist intact, and even helps it…Each [neo-impressionist] imperiously betrays his disparity — if it be only through his unique interpretation

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[442] Bridget Riley, "Bridget Riley in conversation with Isabel Carlisle," in *Bridget Riley* (1998), 8.

[443] Félix Fénéon, "VIIIe Exposition Impressioniste," (1886) in *Œuvres,* 1:36. "Son immense tableau, la *Grande-Jatte*, en quelque partie qu'on examine, s'étale, monotone et patiente tavelure, tapisserie: ici, en effet, la patte est inutile, le truquage impossible; nulle place pour les morceaux de bravoure; – que la main soit gourde, mais que l'œil soit agile, perspicace et savant; sur une autruche, une botte de paille, une vague ou un roc la manœvre du pinceau reste la meme."

[444] F. Fénéon, "L'Impressionnisme," (1886) in *Œuvres,*1:67. "La habileté de la main devient une question négligeable, puisque toute difficulté matérielle de facture est écartée.

[445] F. Fénéon, "L'Impressionnisme," (1886) in *Œuvres,*1:67. "Il suffira que l'exécutant ait une vision artiste, qu'il soit un peintre, enfin! Et non un prestidigitateur." "Que cette execution unifrome et comme abstraite…," "Le néo-impressionnisme," 1:74.

> of the emotional sense of colors or by the degree of sensitivity of his optic nerves to such and such a stimulus — but never through the monopoly of agile tricks.[446]

THE PERSONAL SEURAT

While Riley and Fénéon (a century earlier) appreciate the understated quality in Seurat's touch, his touch does have its own distinct texture and character. It is through Seurat's mark-making, for example, that he evades compositional stiffness in *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir* (1890) (Fig. 46). Despite evidence of wind — the sails of the boats are engaged, the flag flaps in the distance — the picture is permeated with stillness. Two impressive anchors on the right, and the lamppost on left, are repoussoir devices that root and frame the picture in stability and symmetry. And yet, things are not as quiet as they seem. The slightly bending curve of the earth in the foreground offsets the linear stiffness of the anchors and lamppost, and gives the picture a subtle feeling of movement and life. Parts of the painting, which appear to be quite regular and regulated are not quite so. For example, the painted ultramarine and mauve "frame" is not completely rectilinear and equivalent in all parts; instead, the border wavers inconsistently, bulging and widening, slimming and narrowing. There are moments in which the forms within the painting interact with the border — in the place where the anchor's stock comes in contact with the painted frame, a few dabs of red/orange "jump" from anchor into border (Fig. 47). Seurat's forms are not contained and proscribed; instead they interpenetrate and unify through the liveliness of mark-making, his touch describing forms but also working

[446] Que cette execution uniforme et comme abstraite laisse intacte l'originalité de l'artiste, la serve meme, – est-il besoin de le noter? … Chacun d'eux impérieusement accuse sa disparité, – ne serait-ce que par son interpretation proper du sens émotionnel des couleurs, par le degré de sensibilité de ses nerfs optiques à telle ou telle stimulation, – mais jamais par le monopole d'agiles trucs." F. Fénéon, "Le Néo-Impressionnisme," in *Œuvres,*1:74.

independently of description. The sailboats in *Le Chenal* adhere to this same material/immaterial dialogue. One can see through the mainsail and jib of the middle-ground boat, its perforated rigging providing glimpses of the jetty, sea, and sky beyond (Fig. 48). This disintegration between figure and ground is especially notable in the distant sailboat that practically merges with its background jetty (Fig. 49). Seurat repeats this elusive treatment throughout: the arm and shank of the anchors become part of the ground; the anchor's ring has gaps through which you can see water; the jetty dissolves into sea; and the flag breaks apart in the wind (Fig. 50-52).

A similar penetration between figure and ground is seen in other Seurat paintings, and perhaps the best examples of this dematerialization come from the years between 1886 and 1888. In the Museum of Modern Art's *Embouchure de la Seine, soir, Honfleur* (1886) the breakwaters give the impression of solid objects at first glance (Fig. 53). But upon closer inspection they are less geometrically regular and less "solid" than they first appear — their stodgy upright forms give way to a fine interplay of dense multi-colored marks (Fig. 54 & 55). In *Temps gris à la Grande Jatte* (1886-1888), the foliage of the trees merges with water and sky, confusing the traditional boundaries between figure and ground. The water and the sky "behind" the trees come to the forefront of the picture as a flurry of pale blue marks intermingling and eating away at the sap green, ultramarine, and mauve leaves of the tree (Fig. 56-58). In both the Barnes' *Poseuses* (1886-88) (and the three preparatory sketches for the painting at the Musée d'Orsay) and in *Parade de Cirque* (1887-88) Seurat's marks are so fine and delicate (in color and material) that the surface of the paintings look as if they've been covered with a layer of powder (Fig. 7 & 8, Fig. 32-34). As Chuck Close says, this is Seurat's magic — "you're aware of the making but not a hand" — and as a consequence of this powdery magic, Seurat's models and trumpet players are on the verge of drifting off into their surroundings, their forms

barely managing cohesion (Fig. 33 & Fig. 59).[447] The dissolution stems in part from the artist's practice as a draftsman. Gazing at *Scène de theâtre* (1887-88) up close, admiring the ways in which forms come together mysteriously, once can't help but think the conté marks suggest magic, as if deposits of crayon fell like dust, settling into the valleys of the paper while hardly sticking to the ridges, somehow making an image in the process. The image is present, but only just (Fig. 60).

Far from stiff, regular, or monotonous, Seurat's marks are enlivened by surprising variation. In *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir* the touches of paint respond with a flux of activity to whatever field surrounds them (Fig. 46). When they near the dark blue painted "frame" the clustering of pale blue, pink, and lavender touches elongate and travel vertically; then they shift directions, and there is a mix of verticals and horizontals in the mediary zone, as if pulled by both water and frame; finally, the cool-toned marks stretch into a more comfortable horizontal pitch as they assume their home within the water not threatened by the verticality of the frame (Fig. 61-62). The lower left corner of the painting is equally varied in color and mark — here a warm tonality of goldenrod yellow, mauve, red, and ultramarine marks intersperse with cooler lavenders and blues and greens (Fig. 63). At the bottom left and right edges of the picture, the marks are more sparse and cool, and warm tones intersperse with the lighter tones dominating. But, the marks rapidly gather and cluster towards the water's edge, where they turn into a fine weave of richly interwoven cool dabs (Fig. 64). Seurat's impulse to follow and adhere to forms is seen repeatedly in his work. In his study for *La Grande Jatte* from 1884 (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) the painted ultramarine and red "frame" is surrounded by little orange and yellow dabs within the picture that follow and support the painted border

[447] Chuck Close in Patrick Pacheco, "Point Counterpoint," 73.

(Fig. 65). As soon as the marks hit a corner, they shift from vertical to horizontal — though it isn't long before they take off into the picture, all on their own journey (Fig. 66).

Even in Seurat's last painting, *Cirque* (1891), in which the artist is more committed than ever to his "method," the push and pull between painter and medium still plays a role (Fig. 28). Variations of the three primaries dominate and the colors are harsh, greatly reduced, and far less nuanced than in earlier works, like *Les Poseuses*, *La Parade*, or *Port-en-Bessin*. Seurat's preparatory sketch for *Cirque* (1890-91) shows his commitment to this un-modulated palette of red, blue, and yellow (Fig. 67). Line too has become more controlled, and more than ever Seurat follows Charles Henry's aesthetic. And yet, for all of its extreme diligence, patience, and focus (and this is one of his most controlled paintings), there still remains a certain amount of flexibility and play. As Bridget Riley observes, in Seurat intuition slips in, whether or not the artist wants it. In the preparatory study, the marks defy figural boundaries — for example in the disembodied arm in the lower left (that disappears in the final work) the flurry of marks takes on a life quite independent of form, enlivening and activating the corner (Fig. 68). In addition, the marks around the head of the clown cluster and gather, then disperse, as if propelled by a force that is scattering them to and fro, dancing and moving like an atomizing field. Seurat's touches travel rapidly from horizontal to diagonal to vertical, they intersect and cross hatch, shifting from longer vectors to smaller dabs. Materially, some marks are thicker and more loaded with paint, while others are thinner, with less paint (Fig. 68). The final painting maintains this interplay, the marks moving at a regular pace, but when they hit a form they change directionality, dispersing. Seurat tries to apply his system, but gets swept away by the serendipity of instinct (Fig. 28).

In the frame of *Cirque* you can see his underpainting — this glimpse "below" or into the work gives the illusion of depth. The variation of materiality and the dense but delicate layering found in Seurat's marks create a navigable spatial field. In his early croqueton, *Le petit paysan en bleu* (1881-82), you can already see this dynamic emerging between surface and depth (Fig. 69). Beneath the top layer of thinly and loosely painted marks, there is a more uniform under layer. The brushy top adheres to the surface, while the marks below recede — and Seurat's emerging space unfolds. In the later *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, a similar interplay happens, but here each layer of paint evokes a particular sensation: the more material marks come to the surface of the picture, suggesting glimmer and sparkle; while the marks below speak of deepness below (Fig. 70). Surface and depth, material and immaterial.

In his followers, like Signac, this unexpected correspondence of mark, color, and form is less apparent. This may be one reason that observers such as Robert Rey, André Salmon, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler felt Seurat could have no proper heir — that in the hands of his followers, his neo-impressionism fell into a more pedantic and predictable pattern. For example in Sigac's *Woman with Umbrella* (1893) or *The Jetty at Cassis* (1889), the marks don't interact with each other or with the forms that they describe; instead, they follow and adhere to forms in a routinized way — they do not shift, disperse, congregate, or interpenetrate they way they do for Seurat (Fig. 71 & 72). The regularity becomes even more noticeable in Signac's later pictures, like *Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, Marseilles* (1905-06) in which he adopts rectangular mosaic-like units (Fig. 73). In short, Signac's marks don't have the surprise, magic, or *personality* of Seurat.

THE ARTIST IN CONTEXT

As digital imagery has infused our lives over the past quarter-century, it is natural for Seurat's "pixelated" method to feel more familiar than ever. In the era of emerging media, the fragmented aspect of Seurat's mark has become at once customary and prescient. Yet faced with a truly digital image — confronted with the boxy, uniform shape and color of the pixel — we are perhaps also more equipped than ever to recognize the chasm between Seurat's pointillism and a truly mechanical mark. What may have seemed a century ago as mechanistic, in the face of the modern computer screen, reveals infinite layers and depths of nuance.

The pervasive advance of technology has made the literal image ubiquitous: on digital billboards, in video games, on iPhones, splashed across a billion Facebook pages. Today, even the most crude handmade image, with only the slightest variation in mark, screams out with human energy from an increasingly synthetic landscape. When pixilation first became widespread, on personal computers during the 1970s and 1980s, the ability to distill a complex image into pure blocks of color captured our imagination; yet little by little, as higher resolution images have taken hold, the blocks recede logarithmically from view, until today, on the most current iPad "retina display," inventors boast that the naked eye can no longer see an individual pixel. Indeed, watching a modern Blu-Ray movie on a High Definition screen sometimes seems more precise than reality itself — the detail of a close-up shot more revealing than the human eye could detect.

But as the digital image has become less *digital*, something usual has begun: the era of nostalgic pixilation is also emerging. Today, on kitschy websites, you can buy ties, mugs, and shirts with images of deliberate pixilation — some of which actually exclaim, in pixilated letters, "I love pixels." Even as our everyday technology has bypassed the

discernible pixel, a proto-retro enthusiasm for the earlier, simpler, Pac-Man era images made from clumsy blocks, has once again begun to appear on billboards, television, and works of art. These pixels remind us that, even in the imperceptibly small units of a 10 megapixel camera, what we see in a truly pixilated image is a gridded series of uniform color blocks. That is, we see clearly how distinct *any* digital image, regardless of the pixel size (or number) is from the work of Seurat, whose purported "dots" no longer seem like dots at all. Full of variation, nuance, and differentiation, they fill works like *La Grande Jatte* with a rich unpredictability that becomes more apparent than ever in contrast to the flat and hollowed-out spaces that dominate our digital world. Perhaps it is ironic that an explosion of science in the world of image, has liberated Seurat from accusations of the same.

Of course, looking back over a century of Seurat, it is impossible to form any view of his work without a sense of humility. Perhaps our experience of his work today is as closely rooted in a historic current as those fifty or one hundred years ago. We too are placed in a particular moment and culture, within a historical climate, and against a visual backdrop of our own. Perhaps in another fifty years, the suggestion that Seurat's marks are varied and dynamic, rich with detail, will seem anchored to our own narrow time. But what will not change, and never has, is the power of Seurat's work to compel the ongoing debate — to invoke ideas, and challenge them. Perhaps the only thing that does not change about Seurat's work is its capacity *to* change, through decades and through generations, each time in the eye of a new beholder.

Illustrations

Figure 1 Georges Seurat, *La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886

Figure 2 Georges Seurat, *Le Bec du Hoc*, *Grandcamp*, 1885

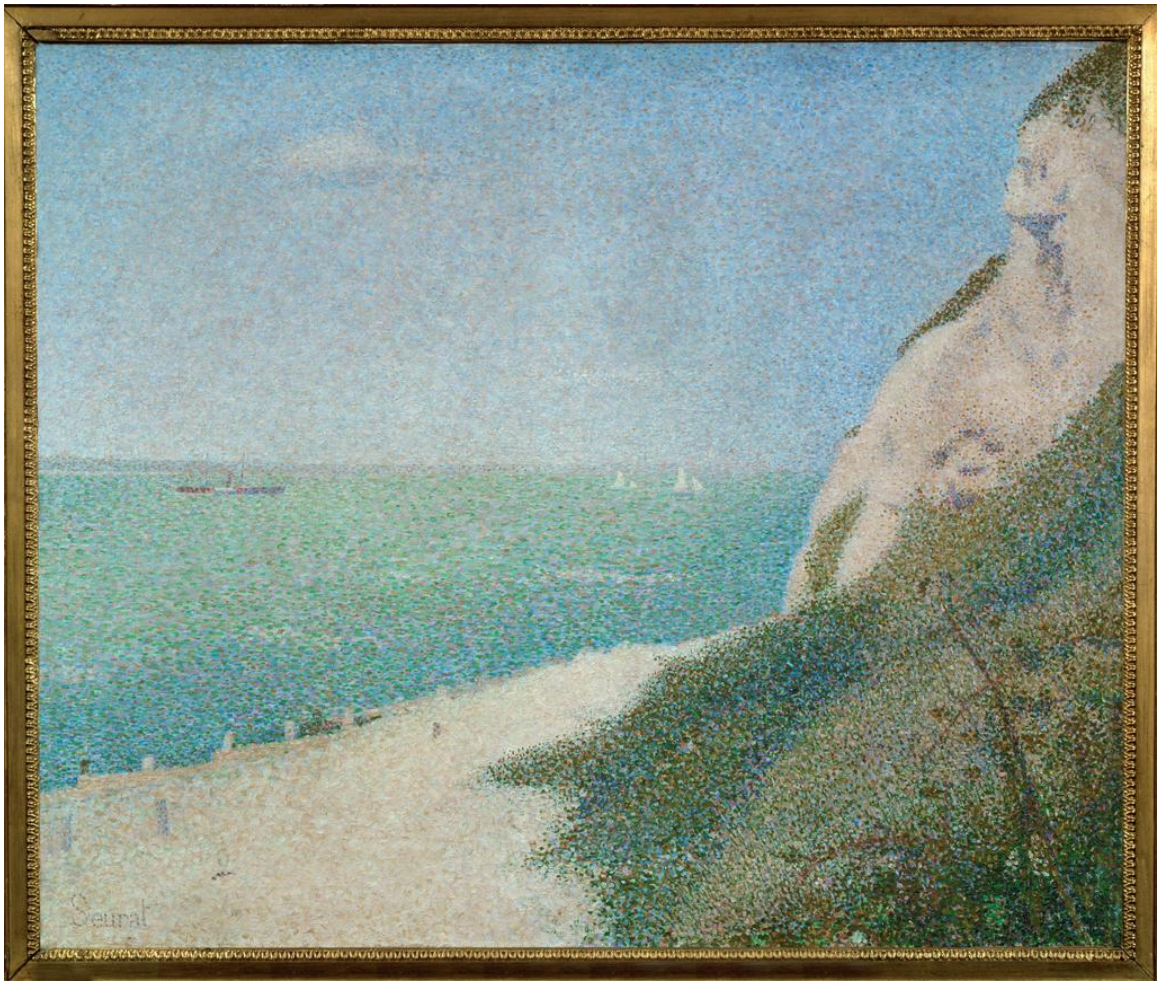

Figure 3 Georges Seurat, *La Grève du Bas Butin, Honfleur*, 1886

Figure 4 Poster for the *Eighth Independent Exhibition*, 1886

Figure 5 Camille Pissarro, *Apple Pickers*, 1886

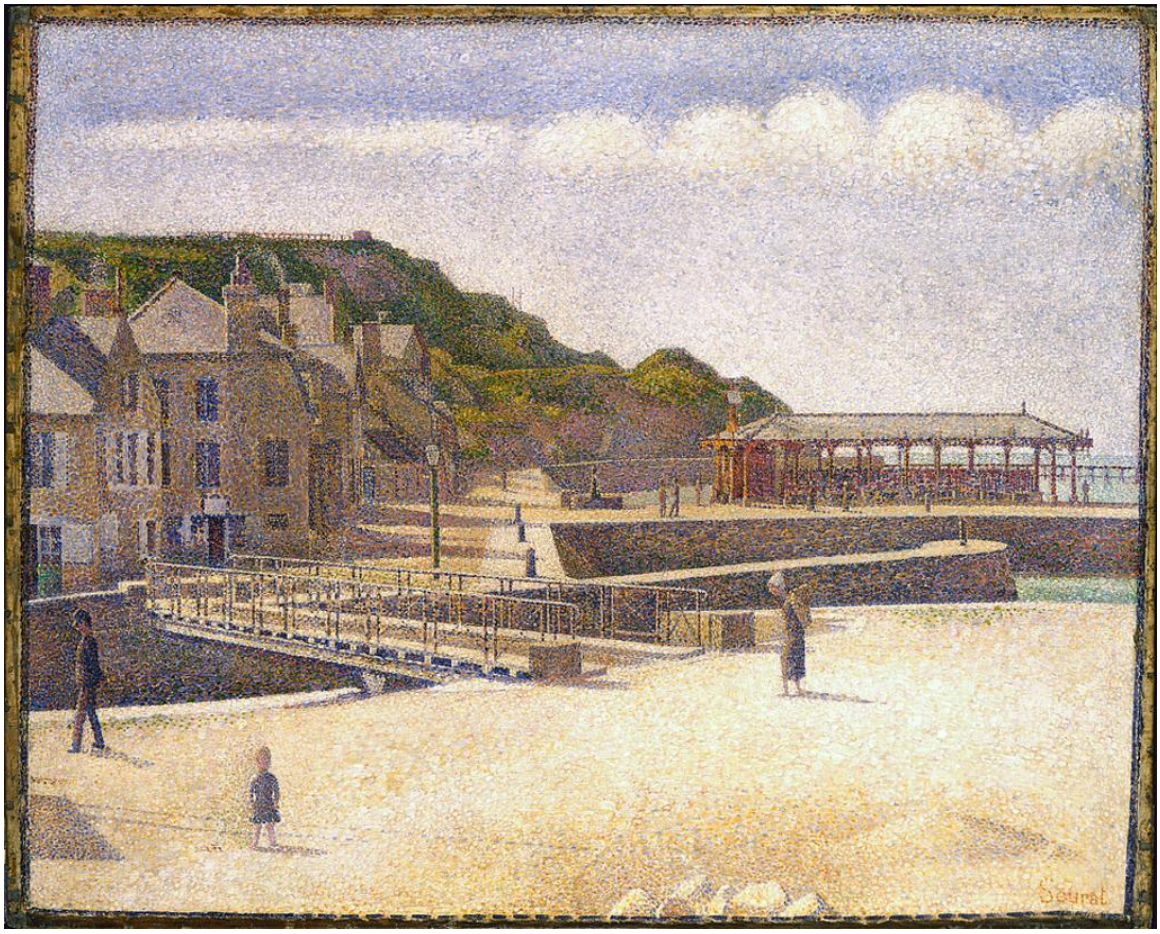

Figure 6 Georges Seurat, *Port-en-Bessin*, 1888

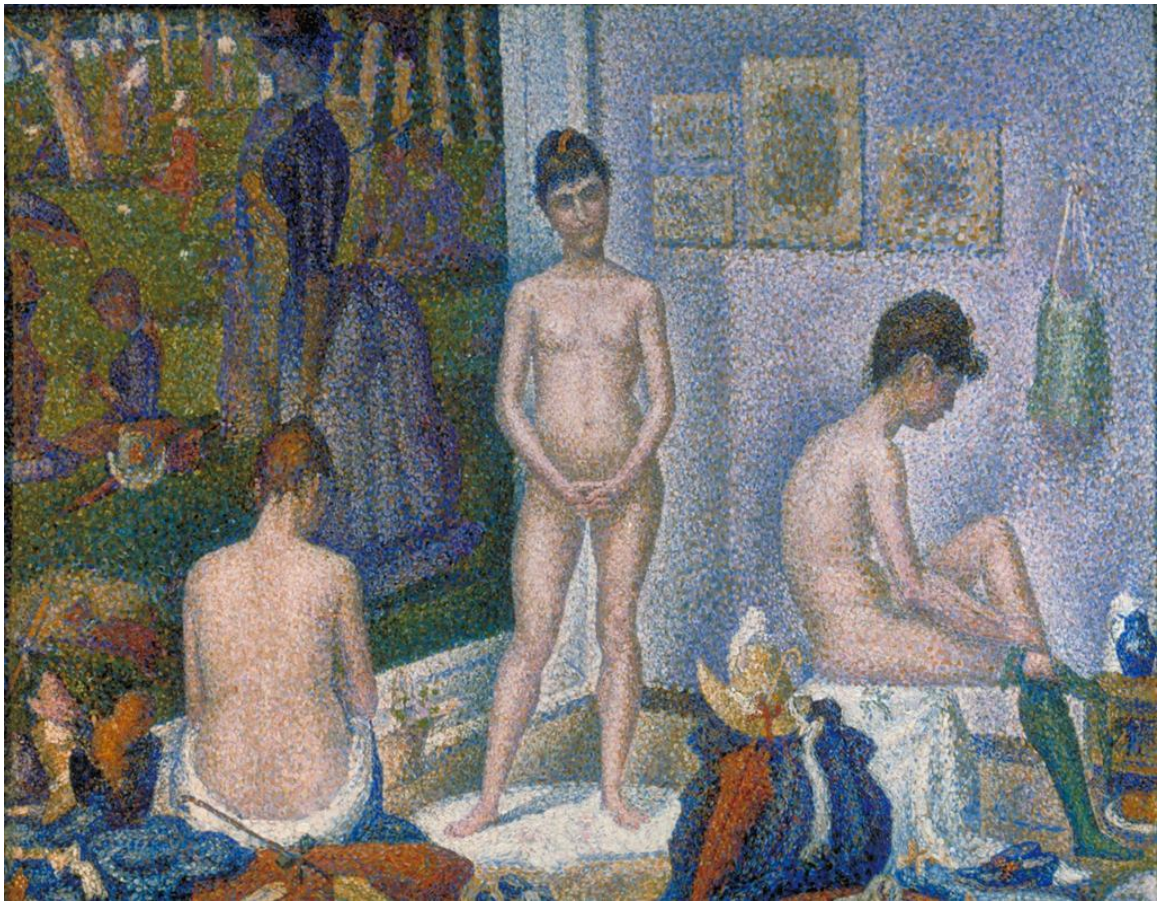

Figure 7 Georges Seurat, *Poseuses*, 1886-1888

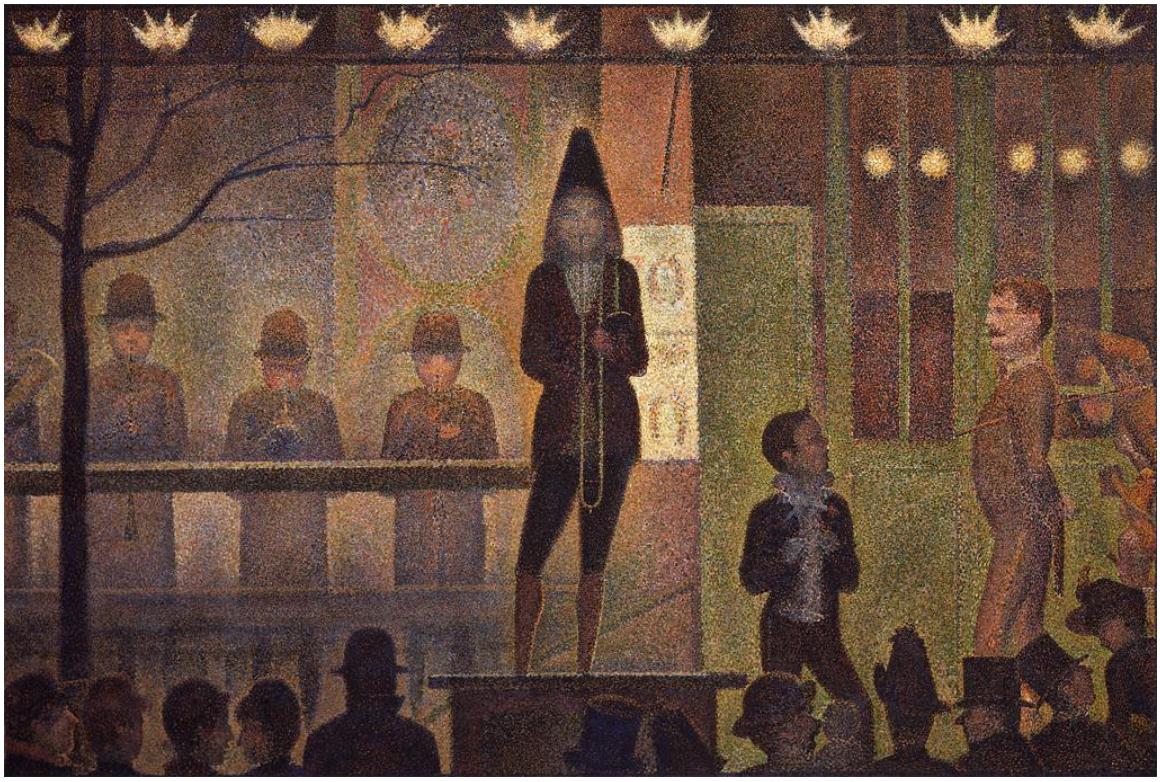

Figure 8 Georges Seurat, *Parade de Cirque*, 1887-1888

Figure 9 Paul Cézanne, *Antony Valabrègue*, 1869-1871

Figure 10 William Henry Fox Talbot, *Photograph of Lace*, 1841

Figure 11 Hans Leonhart Schäufelein, *Wild Man and Wild Woman*

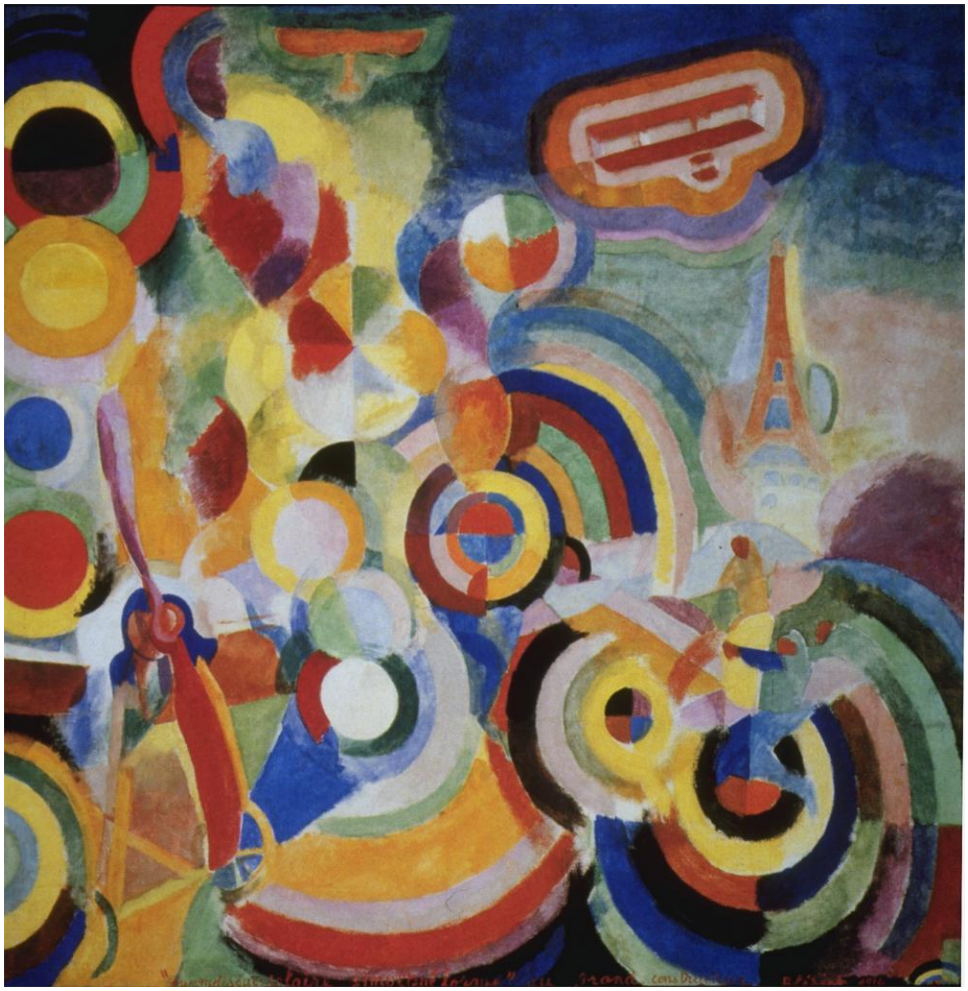

Figure 12 Robert Delaunay, *Homage to Blériot*, 1914

Figure 13 Giacomo Balla, *Speeding Automobile*, 1912

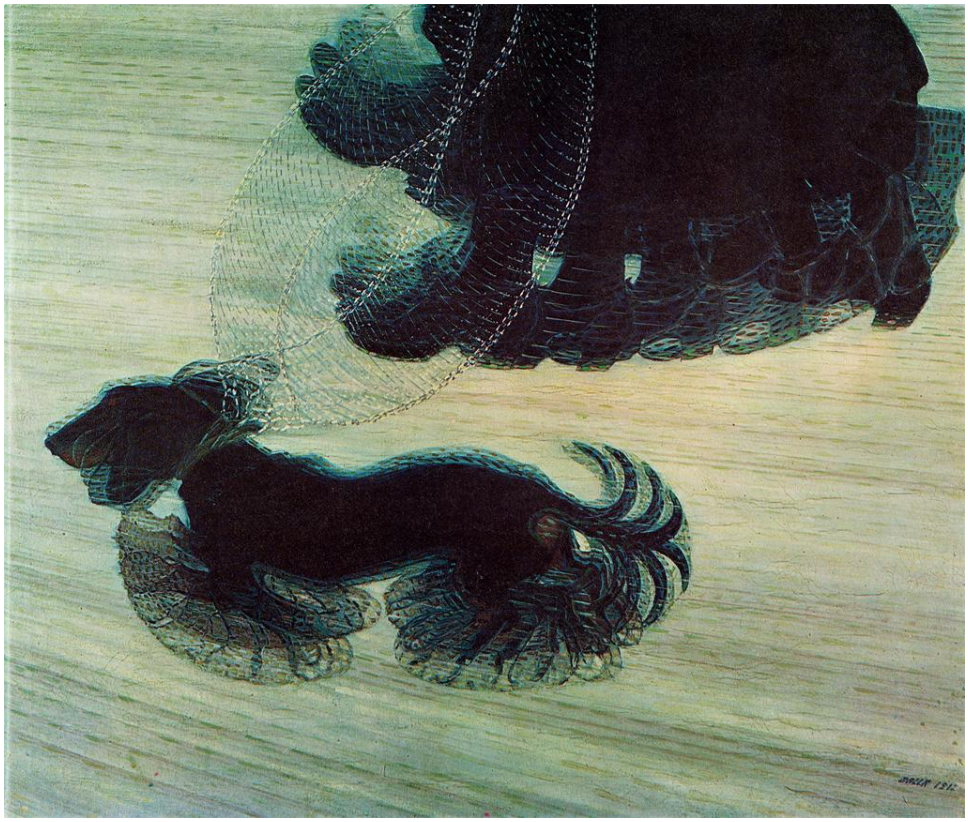

Figure 14 Giacomo Balla, *Dog on a Leash*, 1912

Figure 15 Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913

Figure 16 Robert Delaunay, *The Eiffel Tower*, 1910-11

Figure 17 Robert Delaunay, *Eiffel Tower*, 1910-11

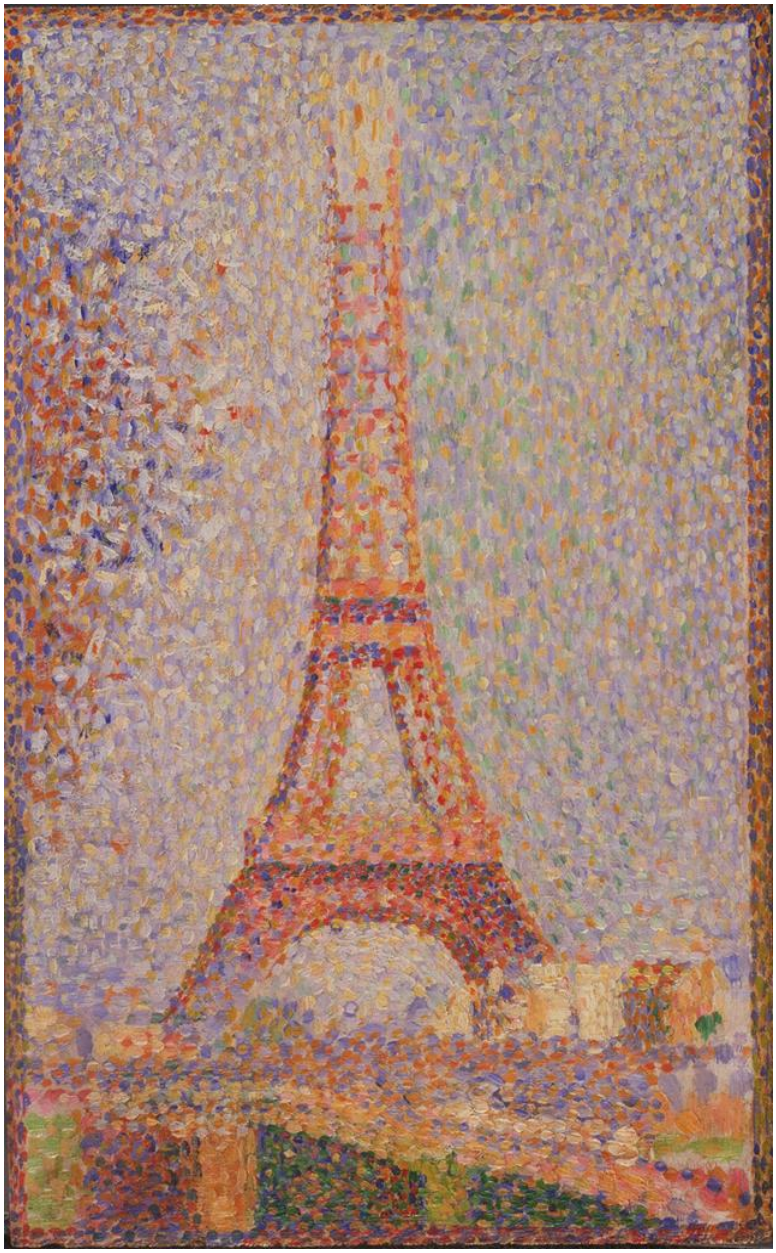

Figure 18 Georges Seurat, *La tour Eiffel*, 1889

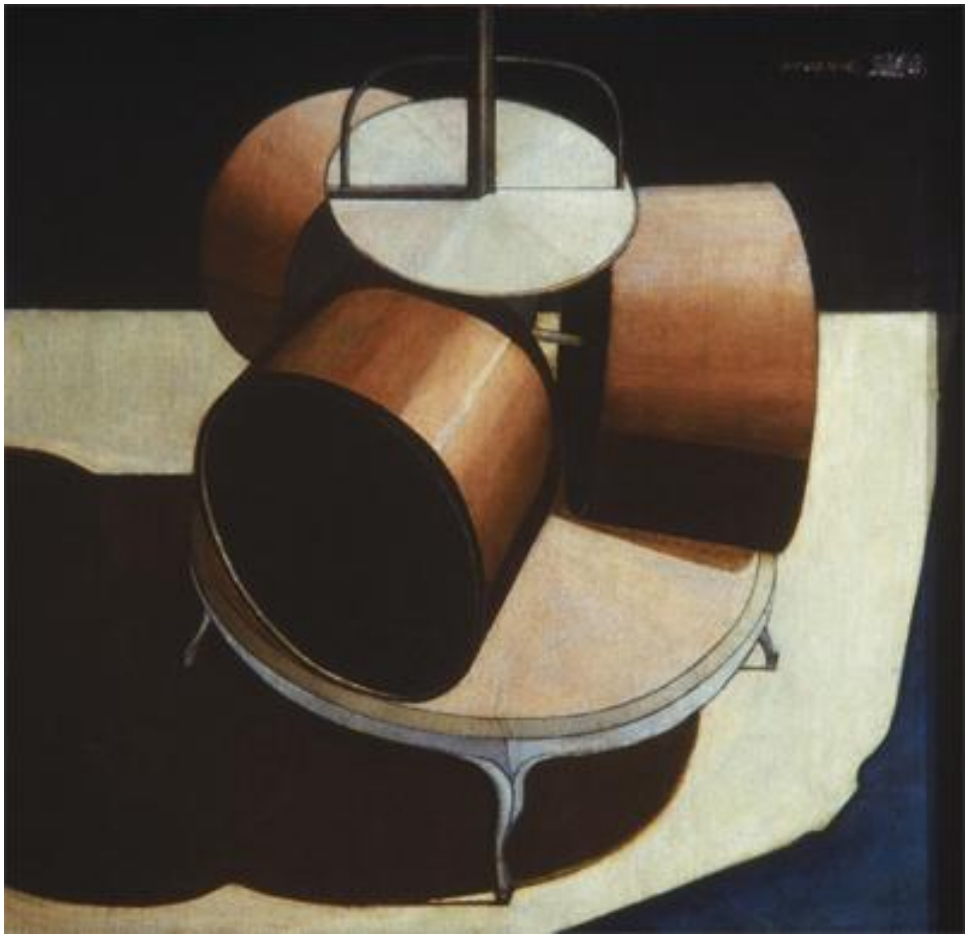

Figure 19 Marcel Duchamp, *Chocolate Grinder*, 1914

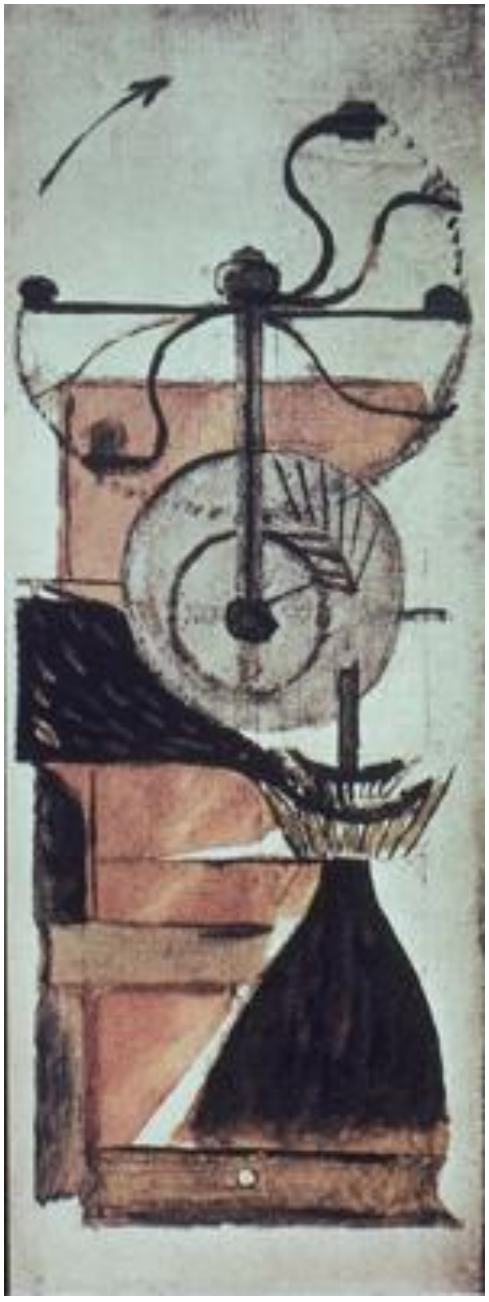

Figure 20 Marcel Duchamp, *Coffee Mill*, 1911

Figure 21 MoMA's "Machine Art" design exhibit, 1934

Figure 22 Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme, et volupté*, 1904-05

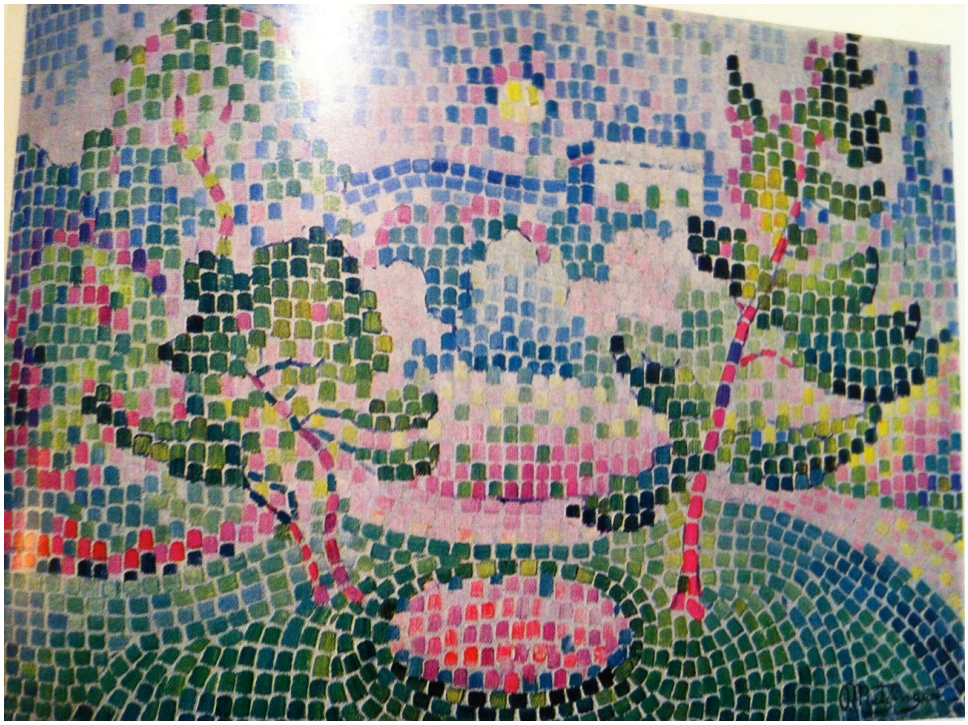

Figure 23 Jean Metzinger, *Landscape with Fountain*, 1906-07

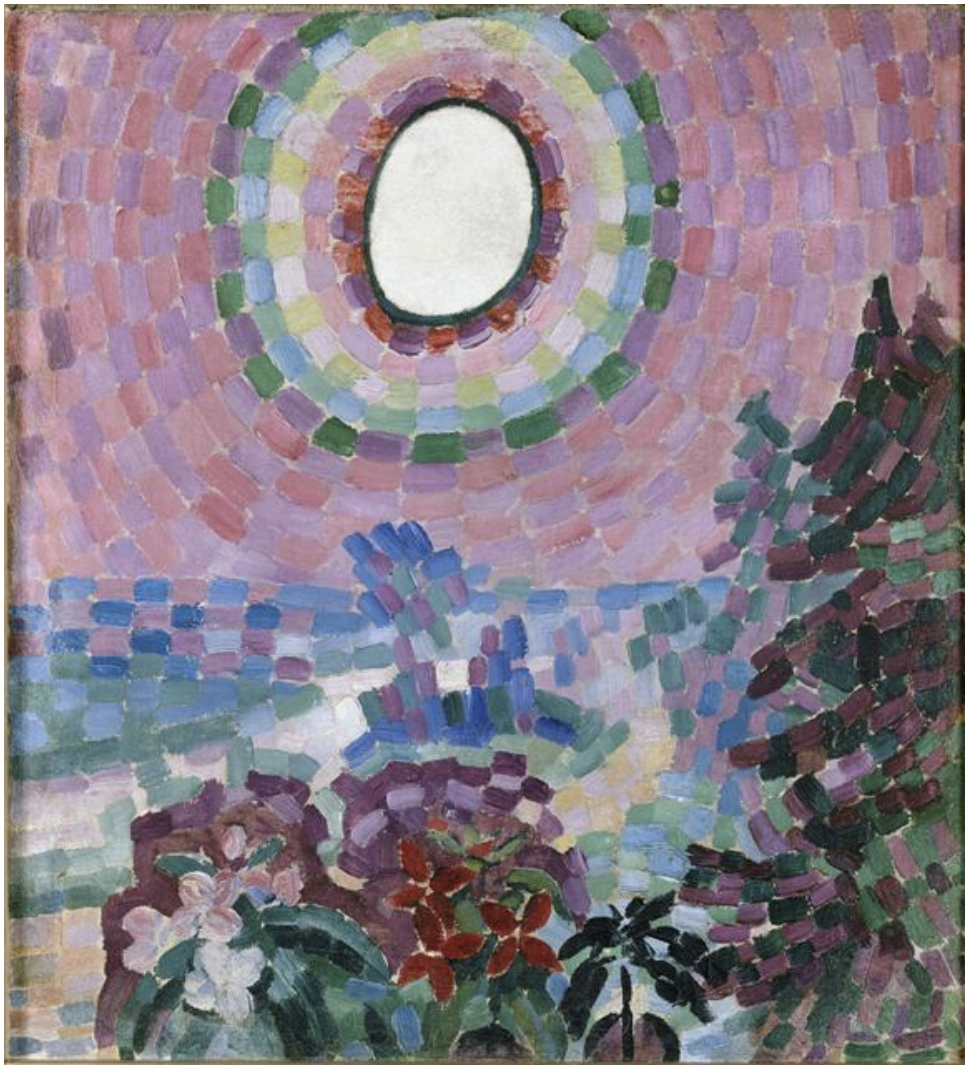

Figure 24 Robert Delaunay, *Solar Disk*, 1906

Figure 25 Pablo Picasso, *Green Still Life,* 1914

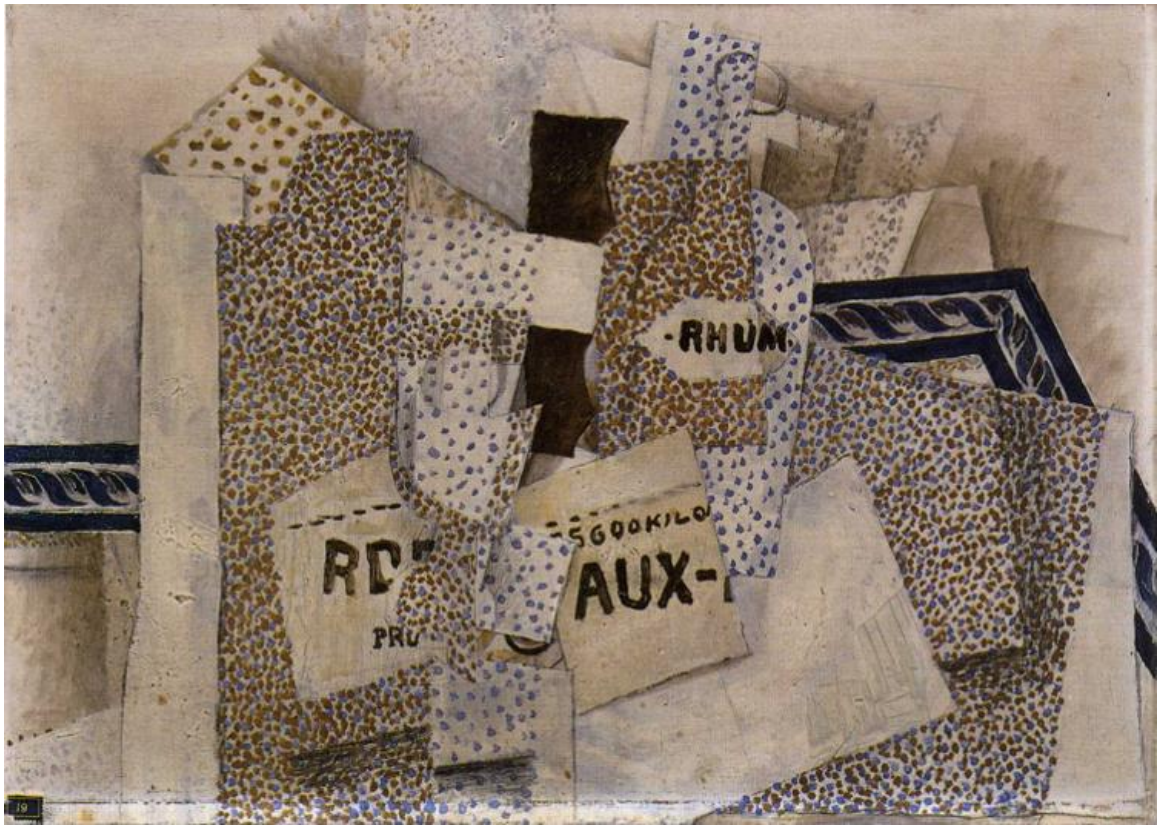

Figure 26 Georges Braque, *Bottle of Rum*, 1914

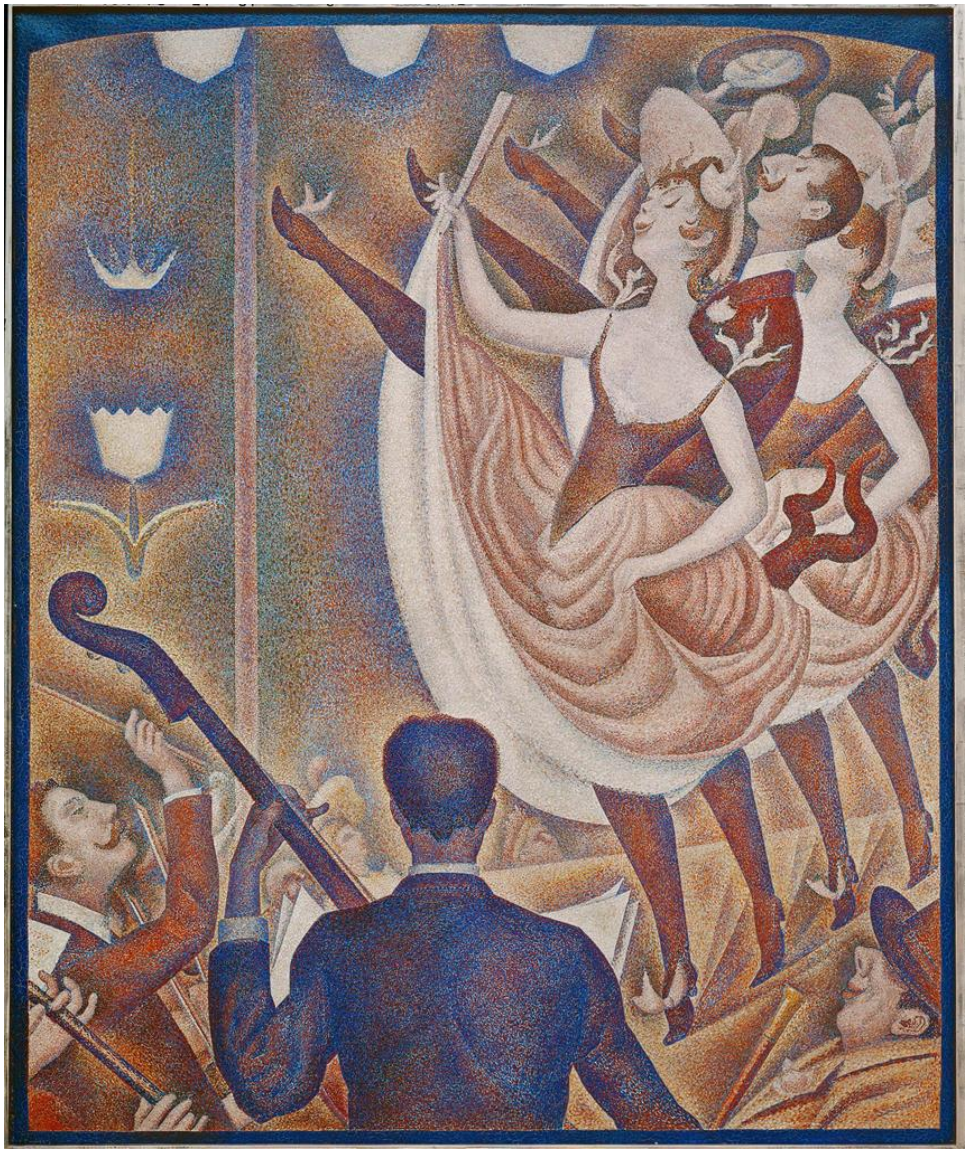

Figure 27 Georges Seurat, *Le Chahut*, 1890

Figure 28 Georges Seurat, *Cirque*, 1891

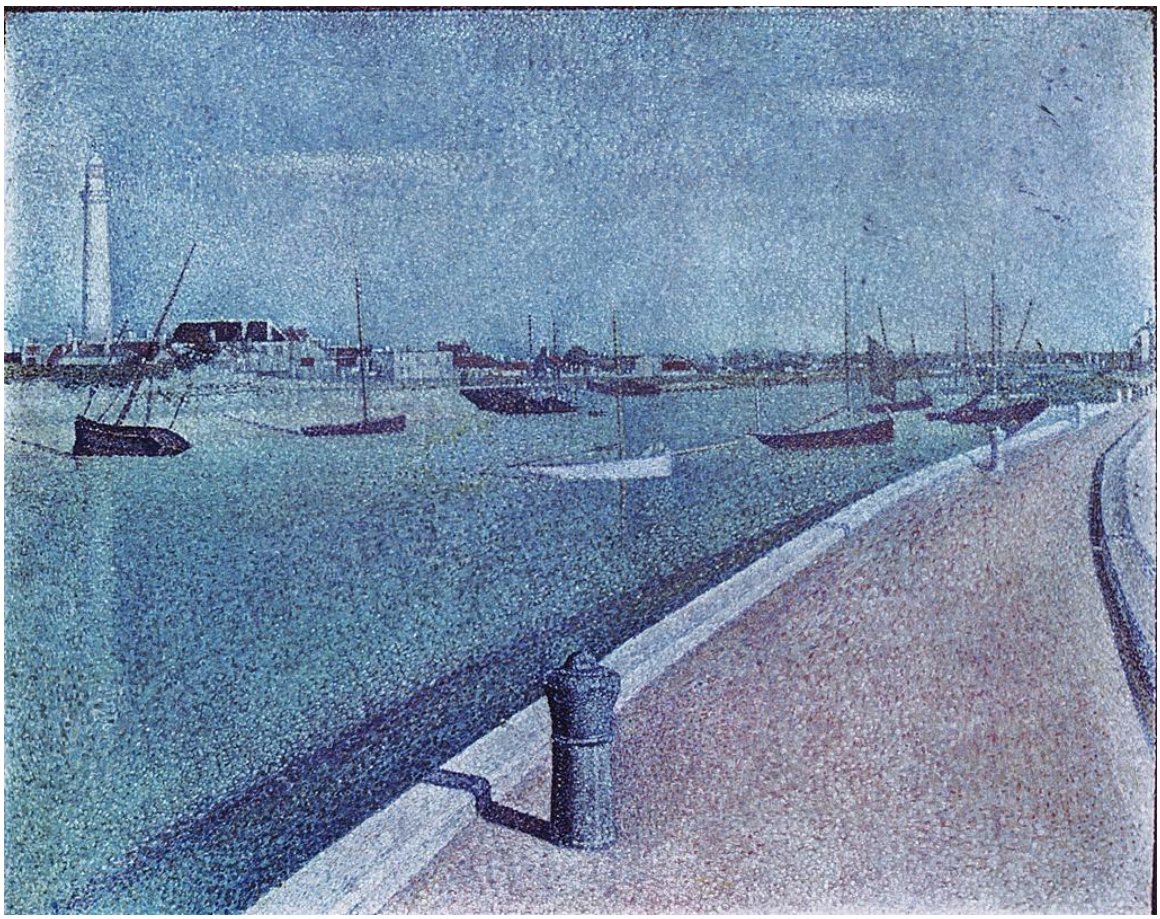

Figure 29 Georges Seurat, *Le chenal de Gravelines: Petit-Fort-Philippe*, 1890

Figure 30 Francis Picabia, *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity*, 1915

Figure 31 Georges Seurat, *Une baignade, Asnières*, 1883-84

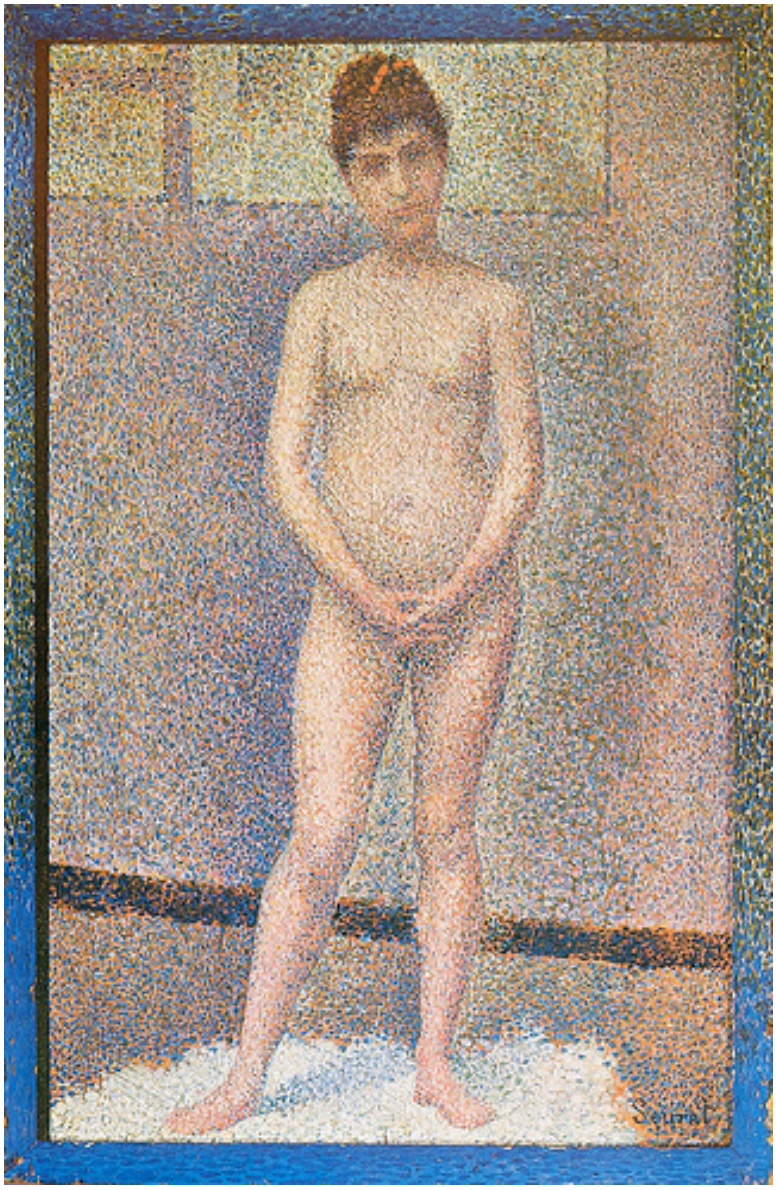

Figure 32 Georges Seurat, study for *Poseuses*, 1886-1887

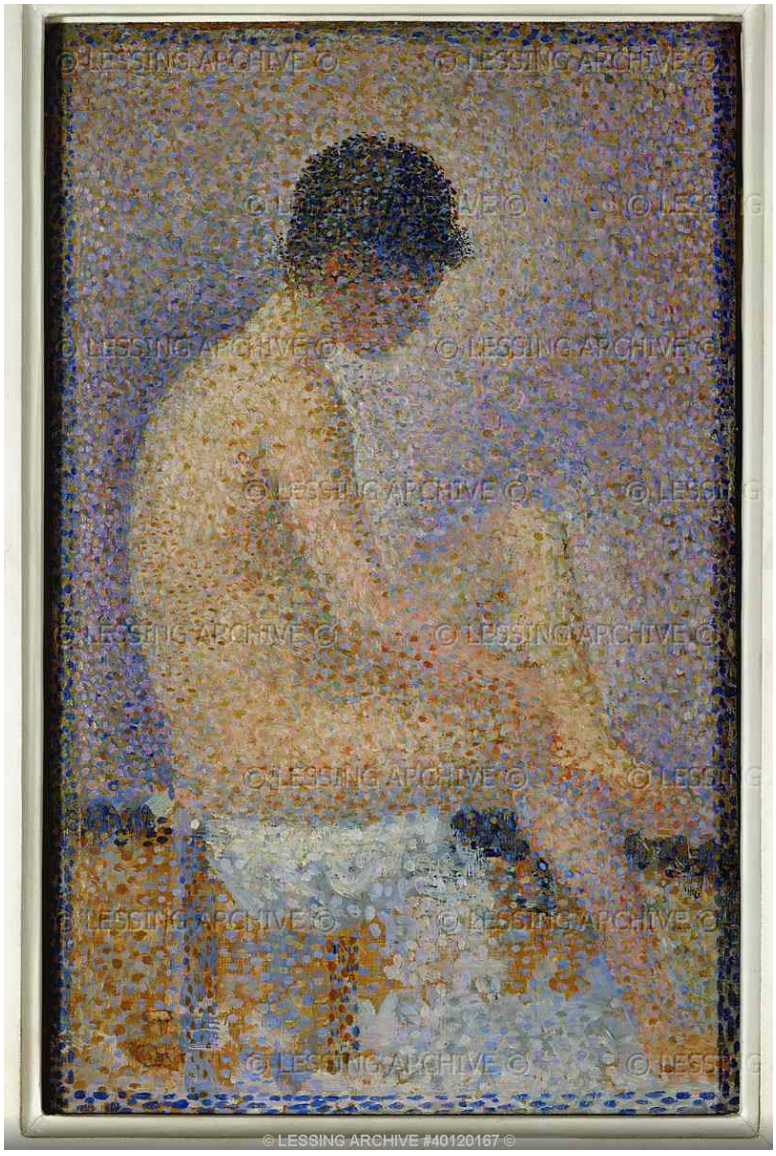

Figure 33 Georges Seurat, study for *Poseuses*, late 1886

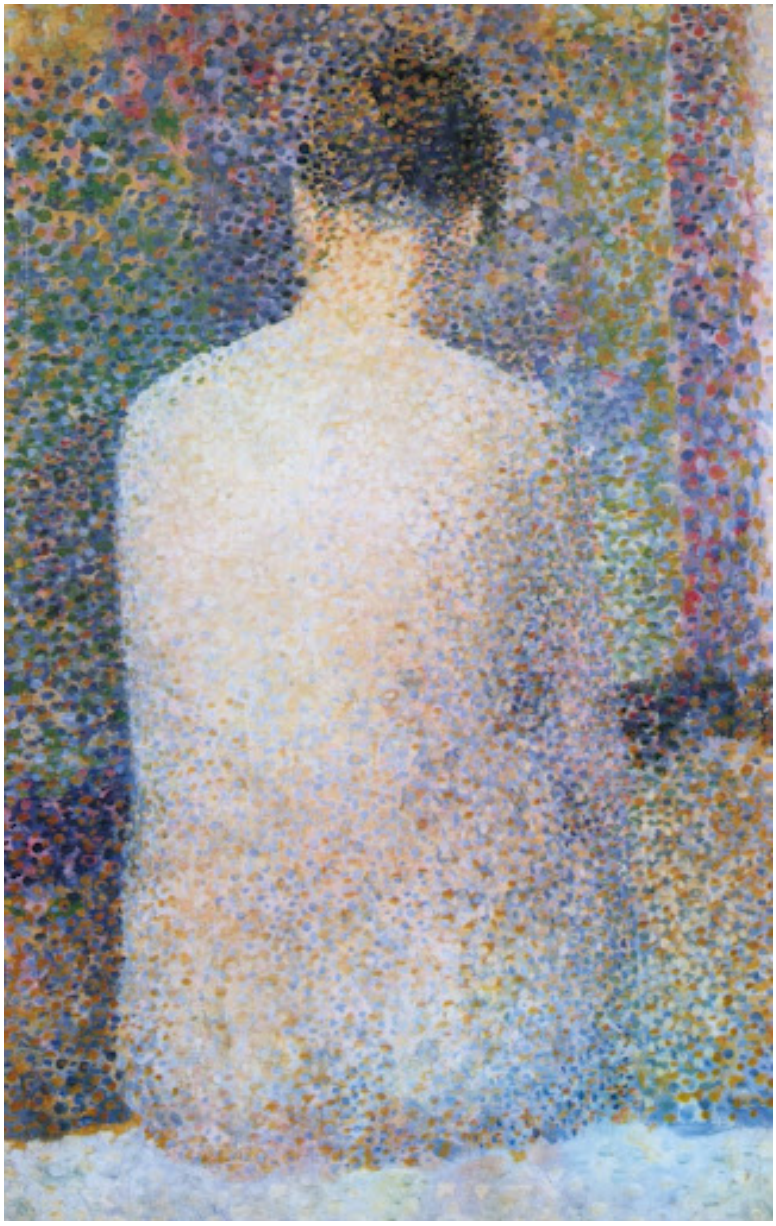

Figure 34 Georges Seurat, study for *Poseuses*, late 1886

Figure 35 Cover of *The New Yorker*, June 18, 1990

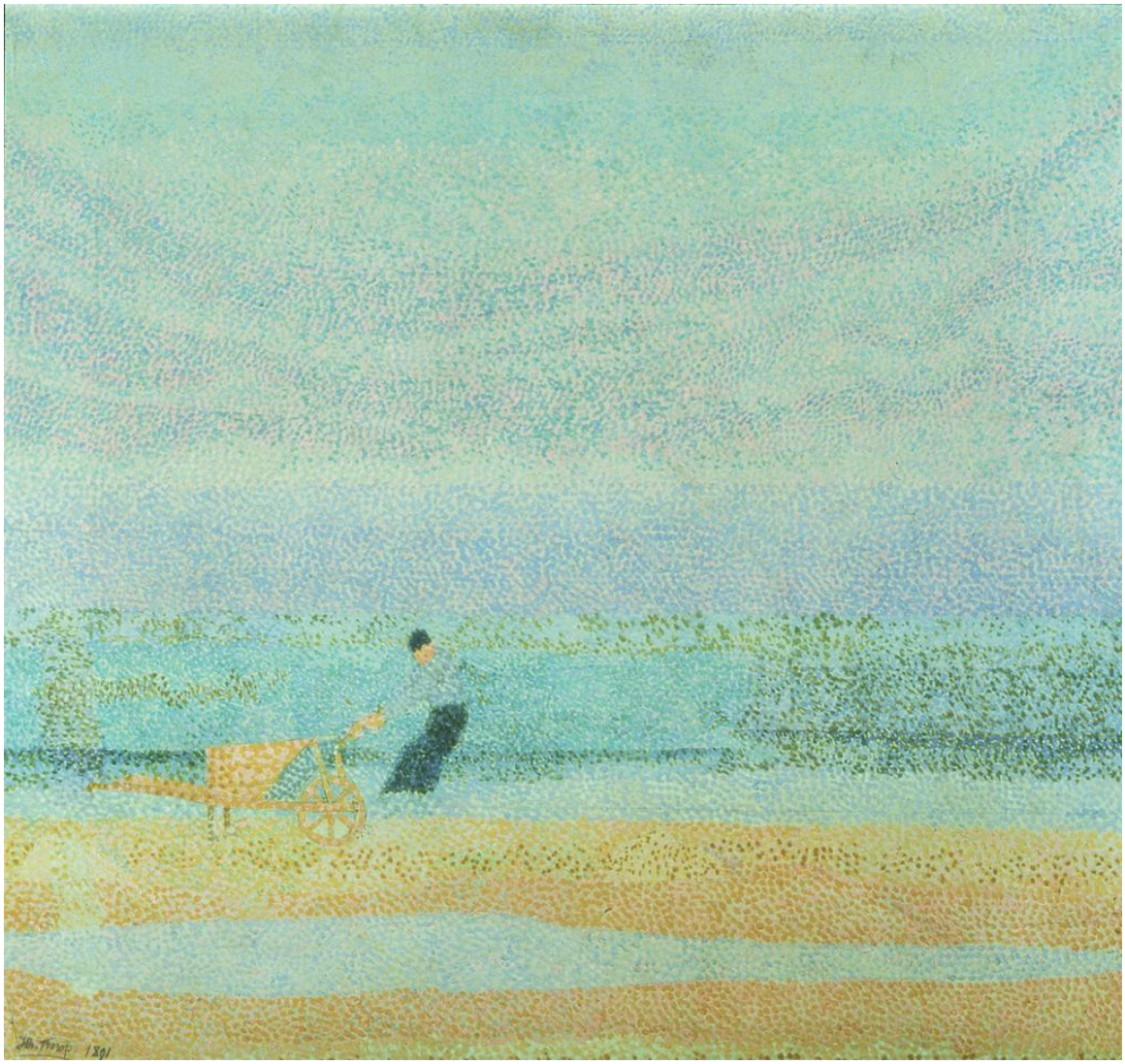

Figure 36 Jan Toorop, *Shell Gatherer*, c.1891

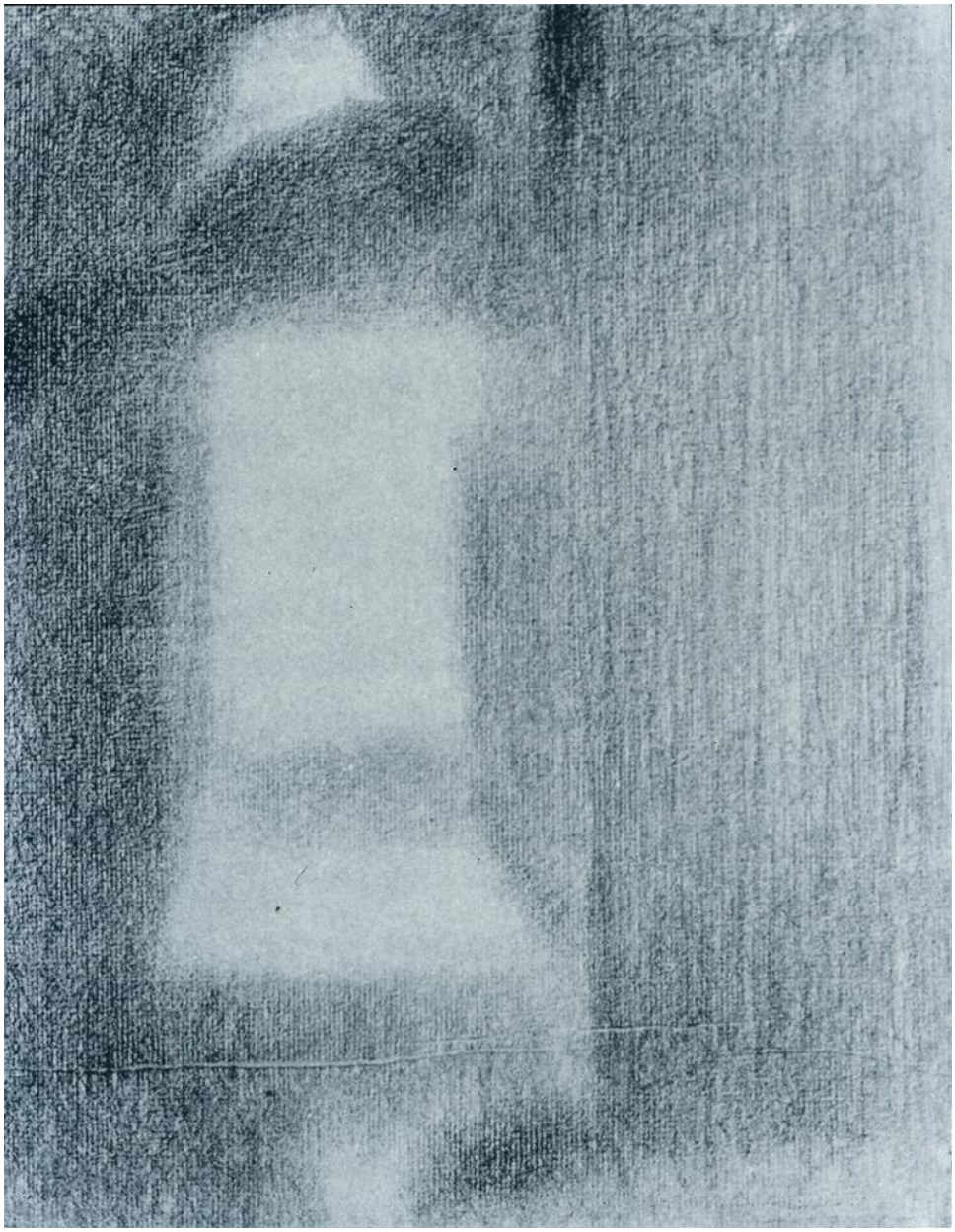

Figure 37 Georges Seurat, study for *La Grande Jatte*, 1884

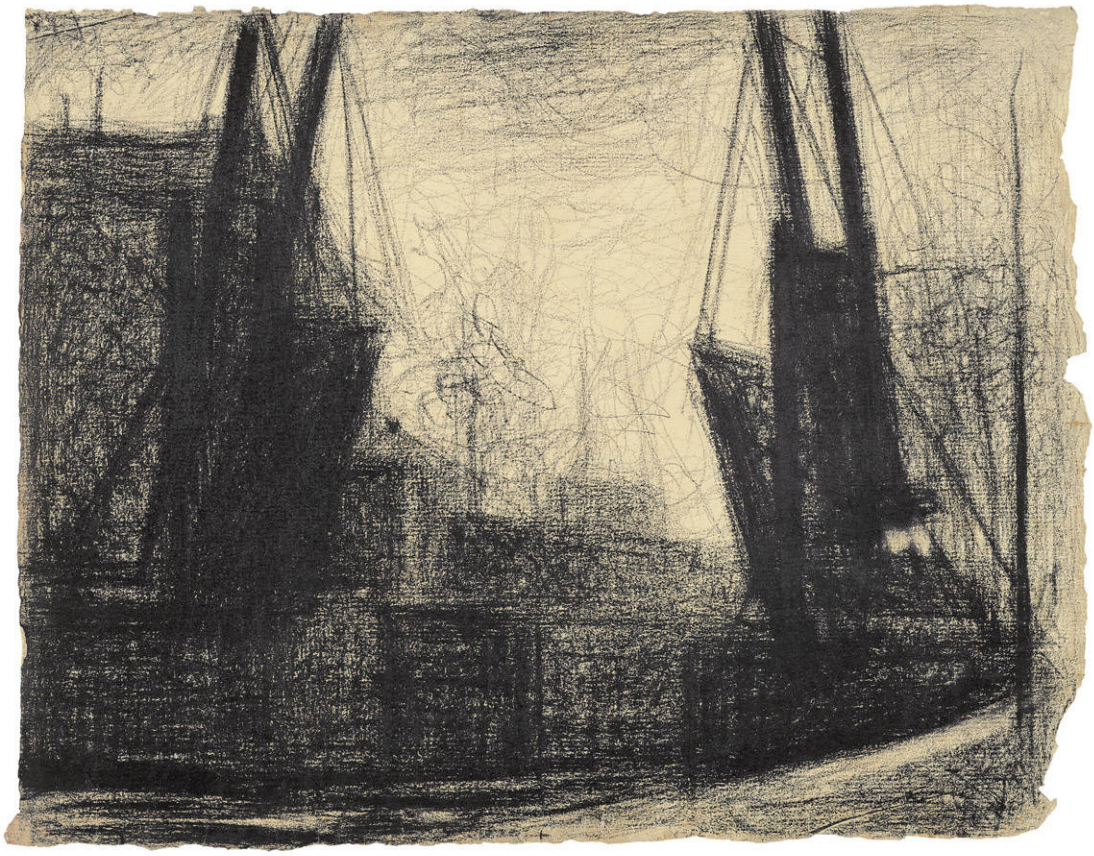

Figure 38 Georges Seurat, *Le pont-levis*, 1882-1883

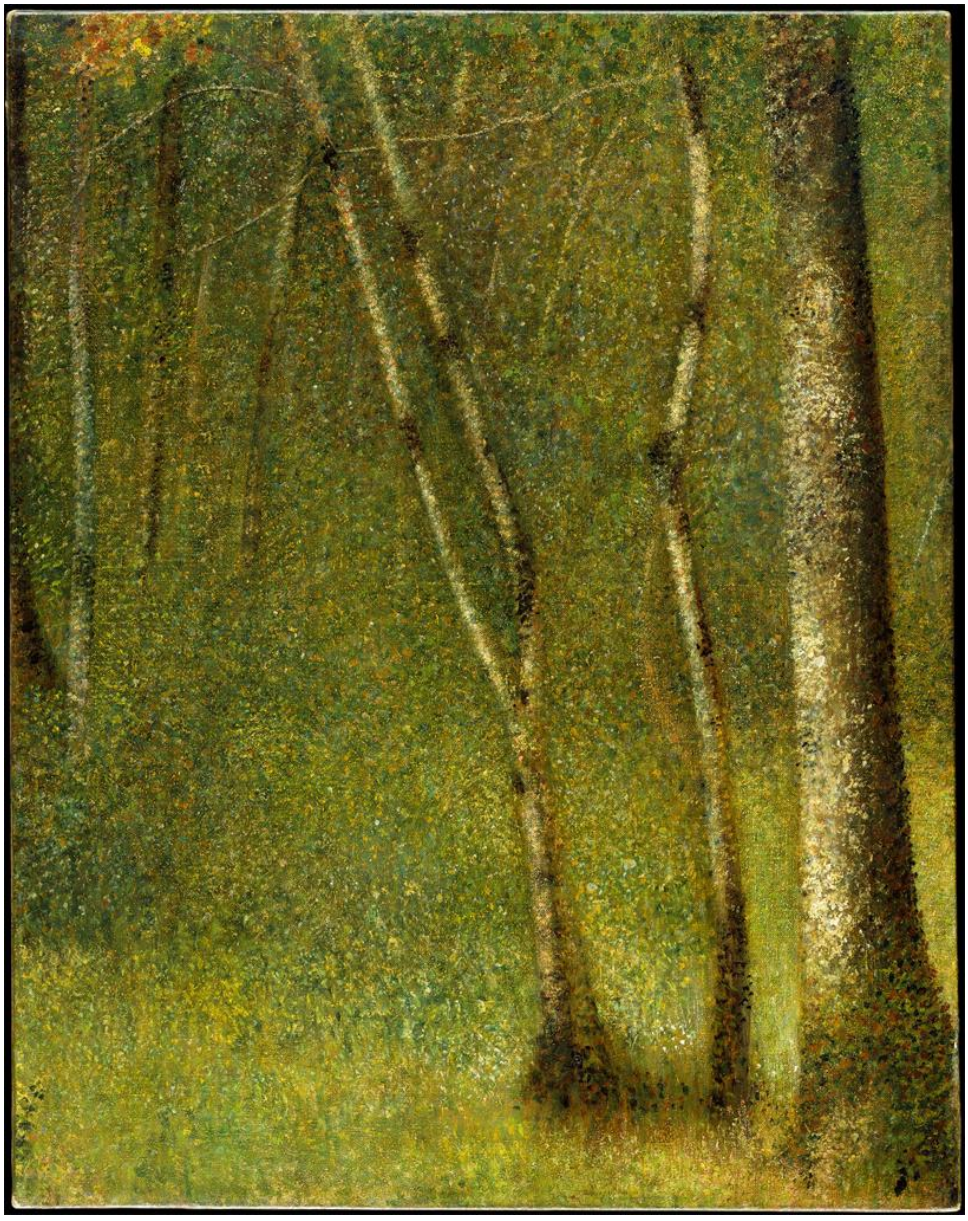

Figure 39 Georges Seurat, *Sous-bois à Pontaubert*, 1881-1882

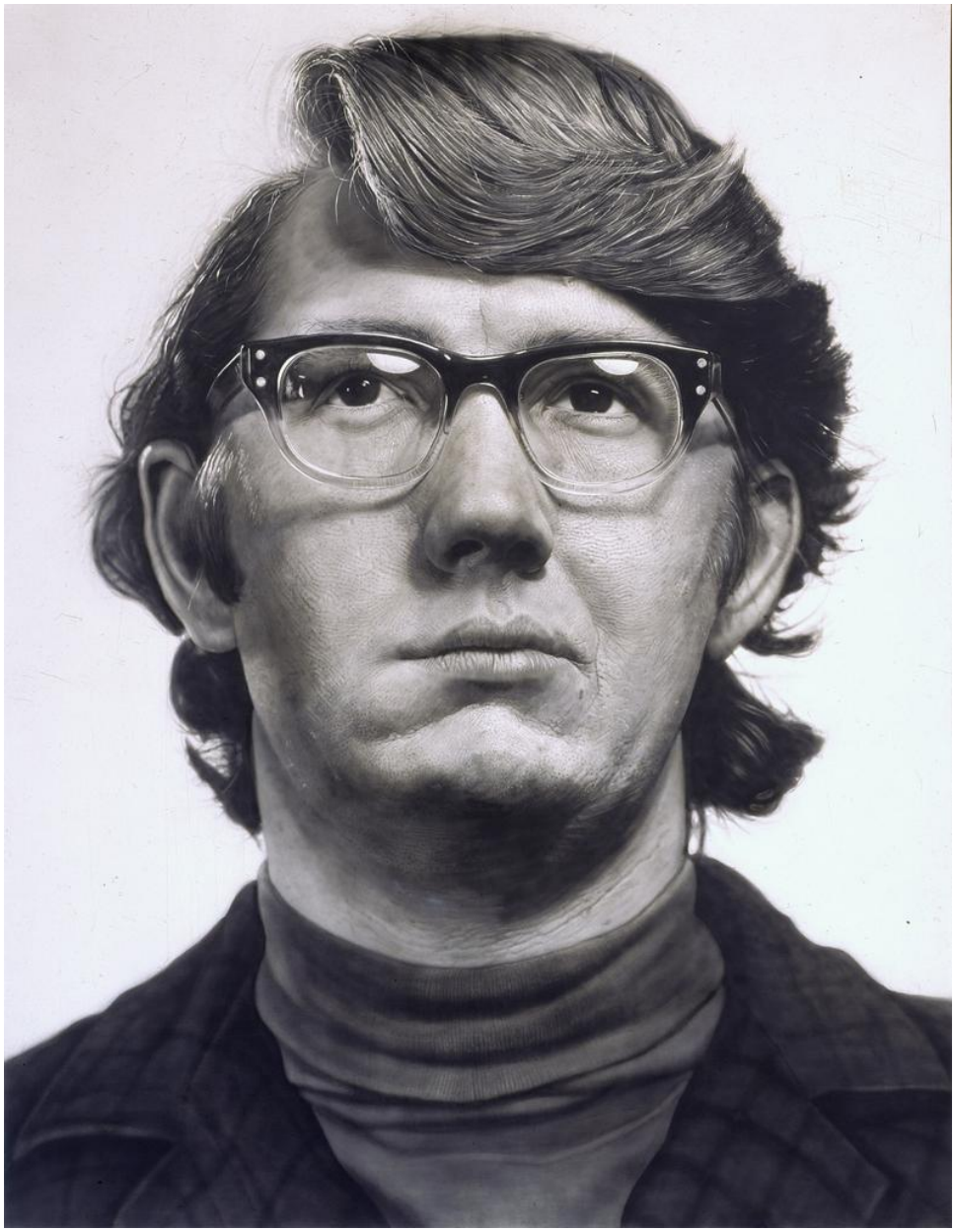

Figure 40 Chuck Close, *Keith*, 1970

Figure 41 Georges Seurat, detail *La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86

Figure 42 Georges Seurat, study for *La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1885

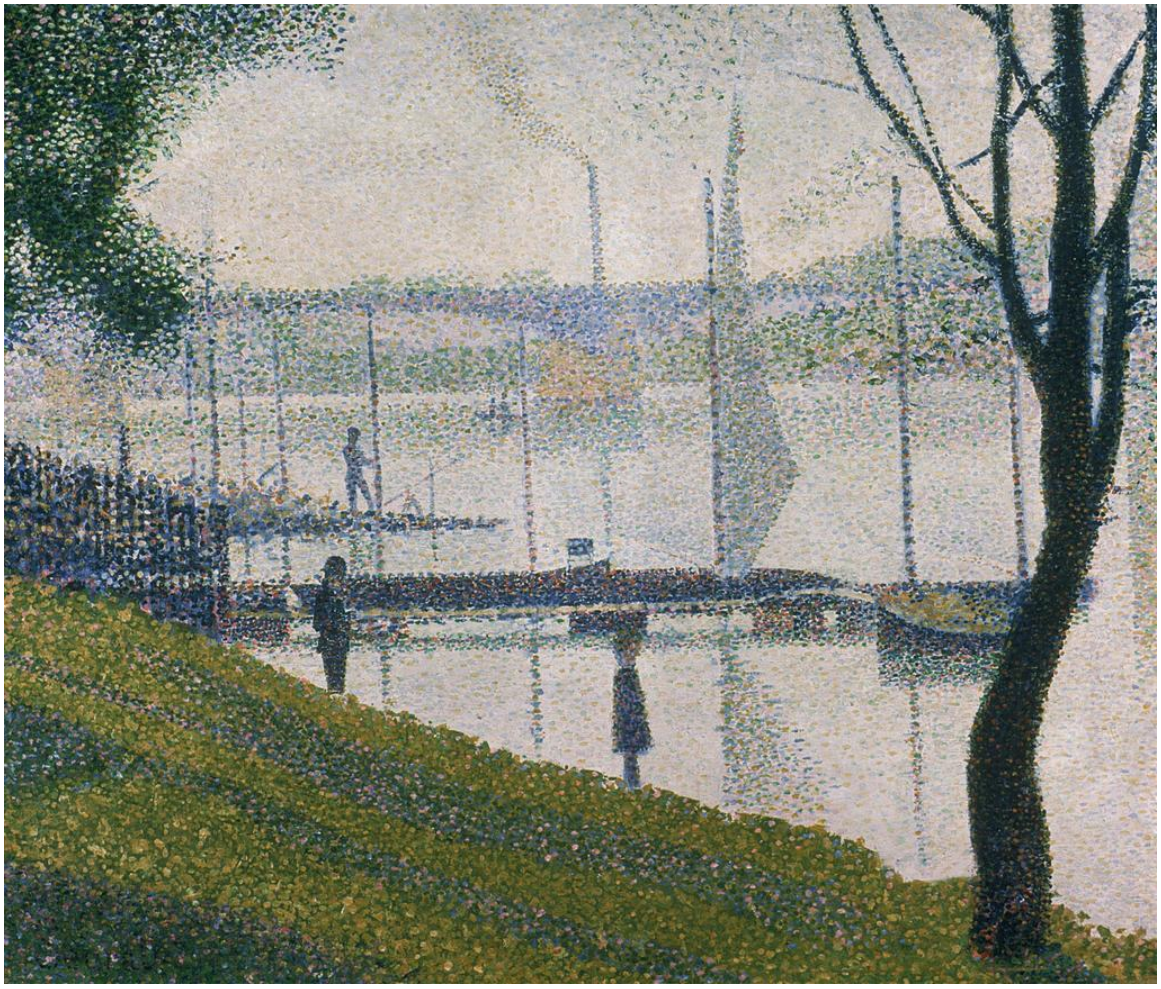

Figure 43 Georges Seurat, *Le pont de Courbevoie*, c. 1886

Figure 44 Camille Pissarro, *Harvesters*, 1886

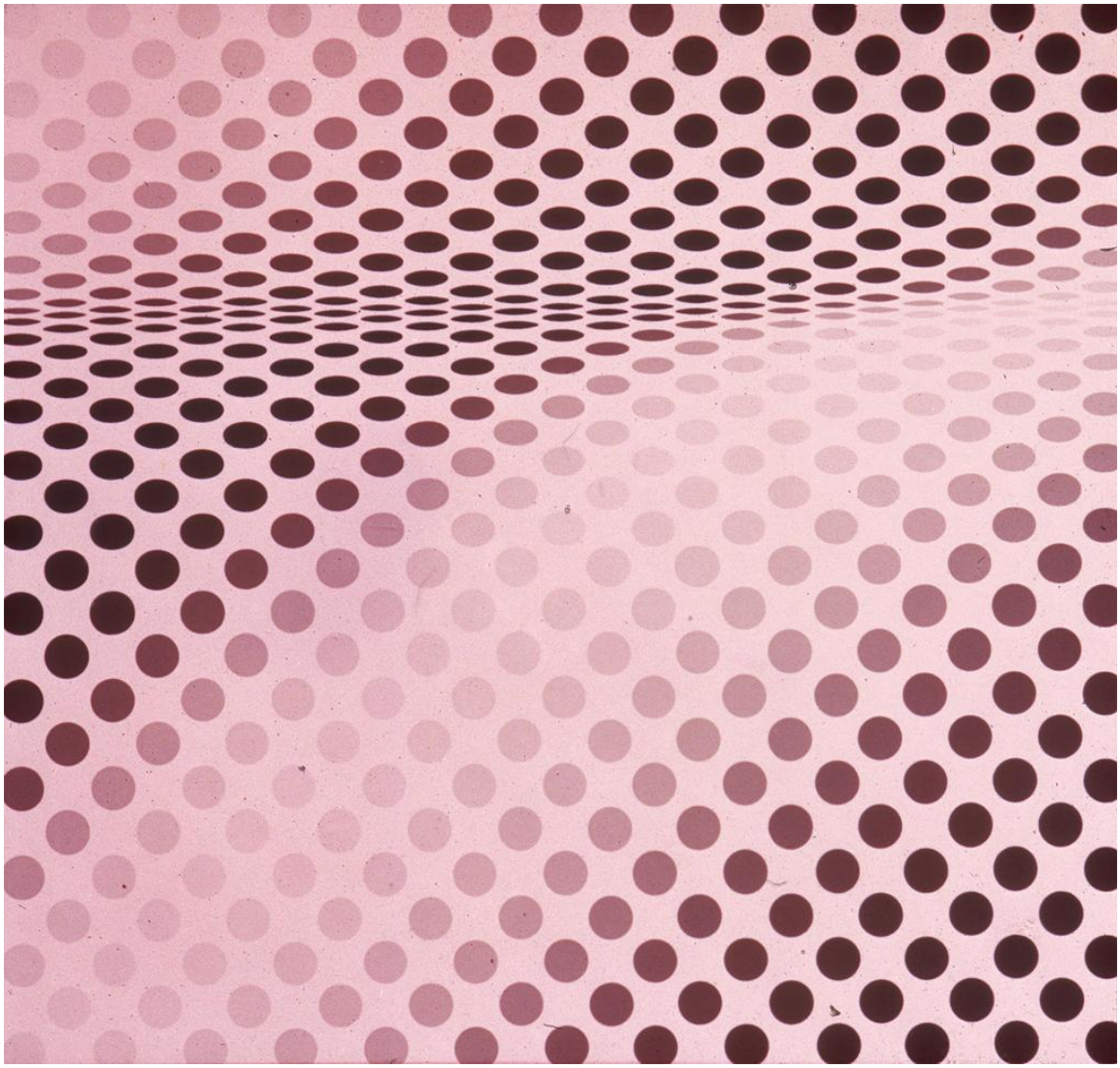

Figure 45 Bridget Riley, *Hesitate*, 1964

Figure 46 Georges Seurat, *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

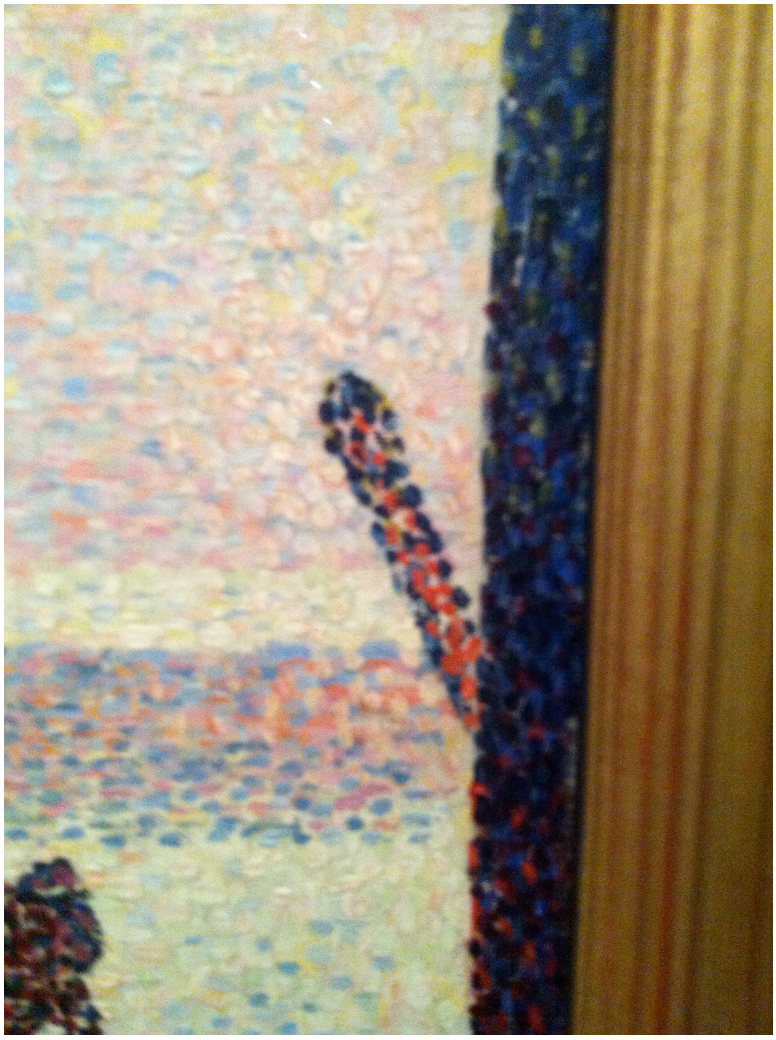

Figure 47 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

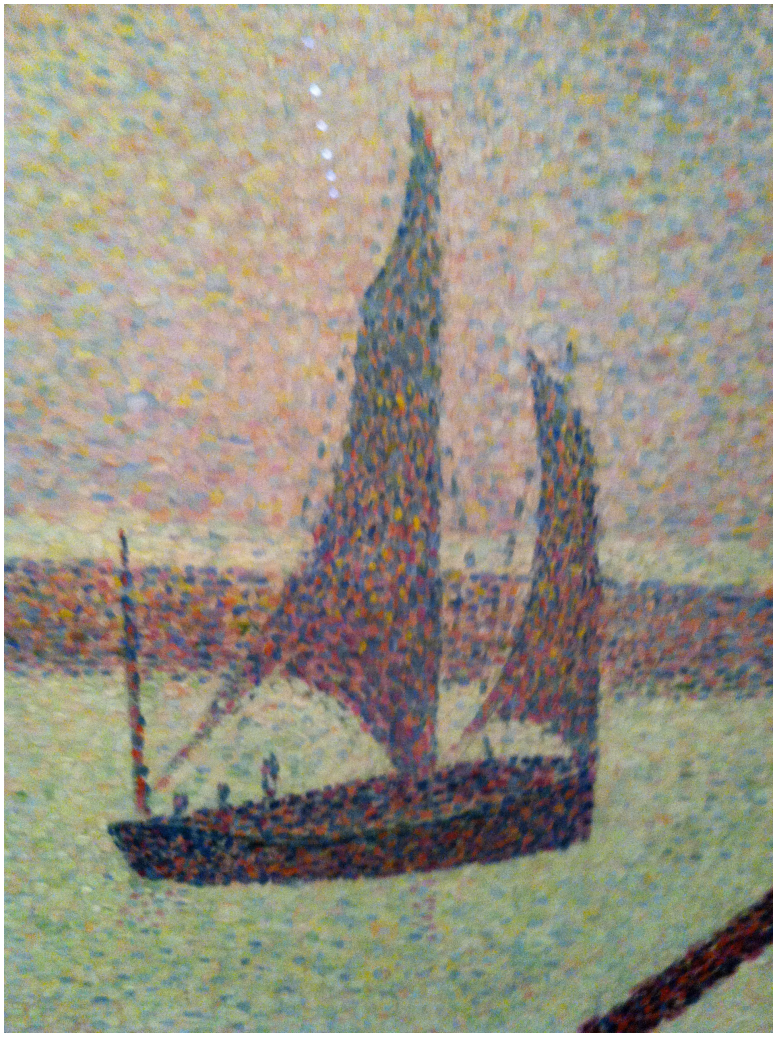

Figure 48 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

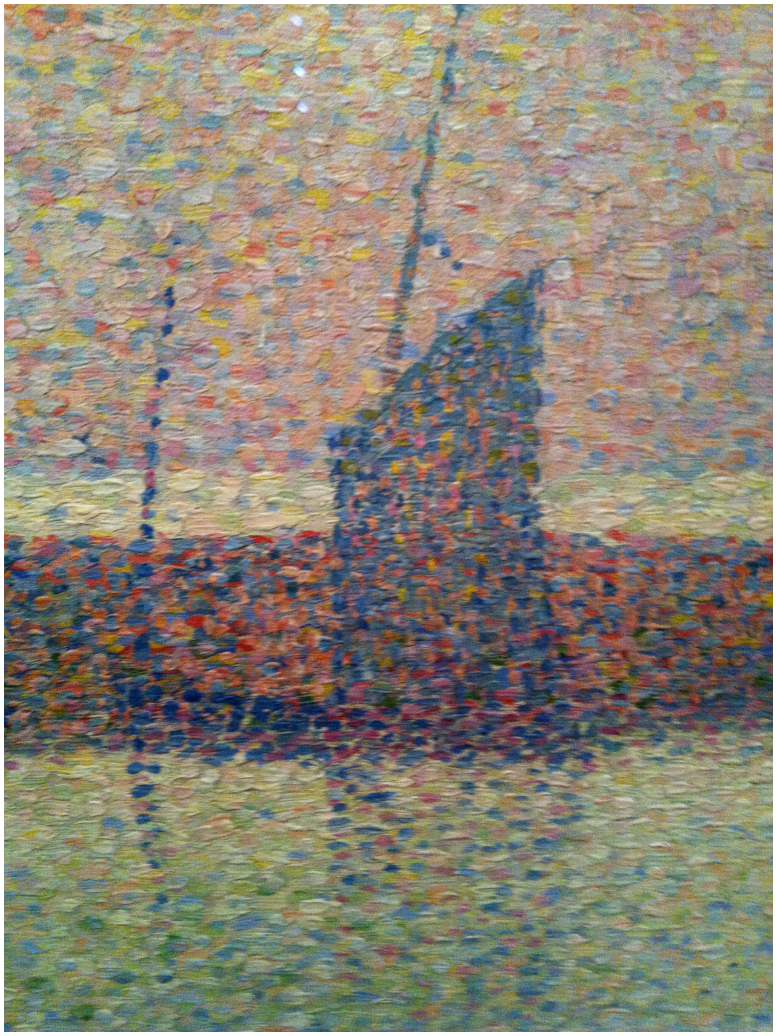

Figure 49 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

Figure 50 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

Figure 51 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*,1890

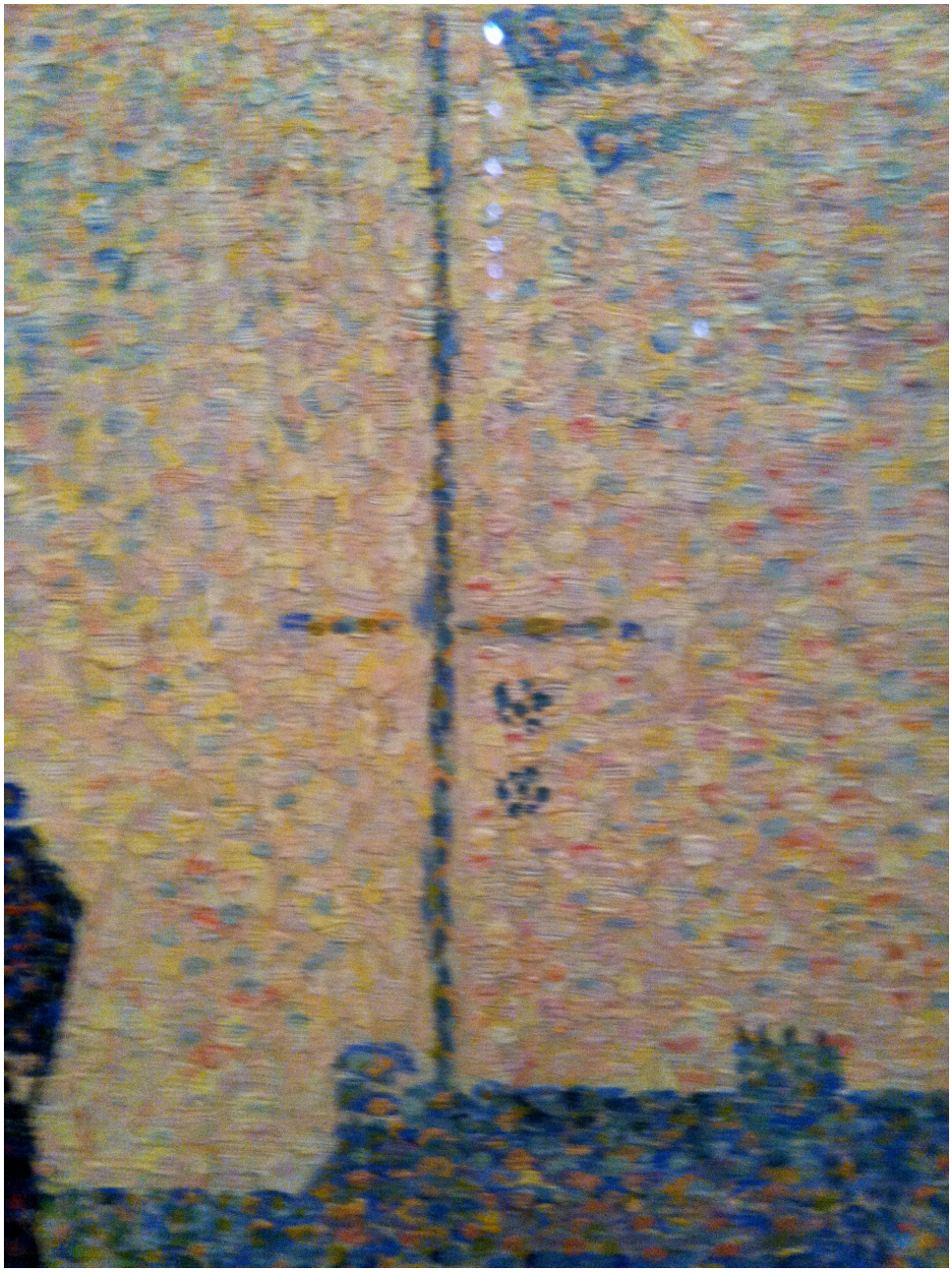

Figure 52 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

Figure 53 Georges Seurat, *L'hospice et le phare de Honfleur*, 1886

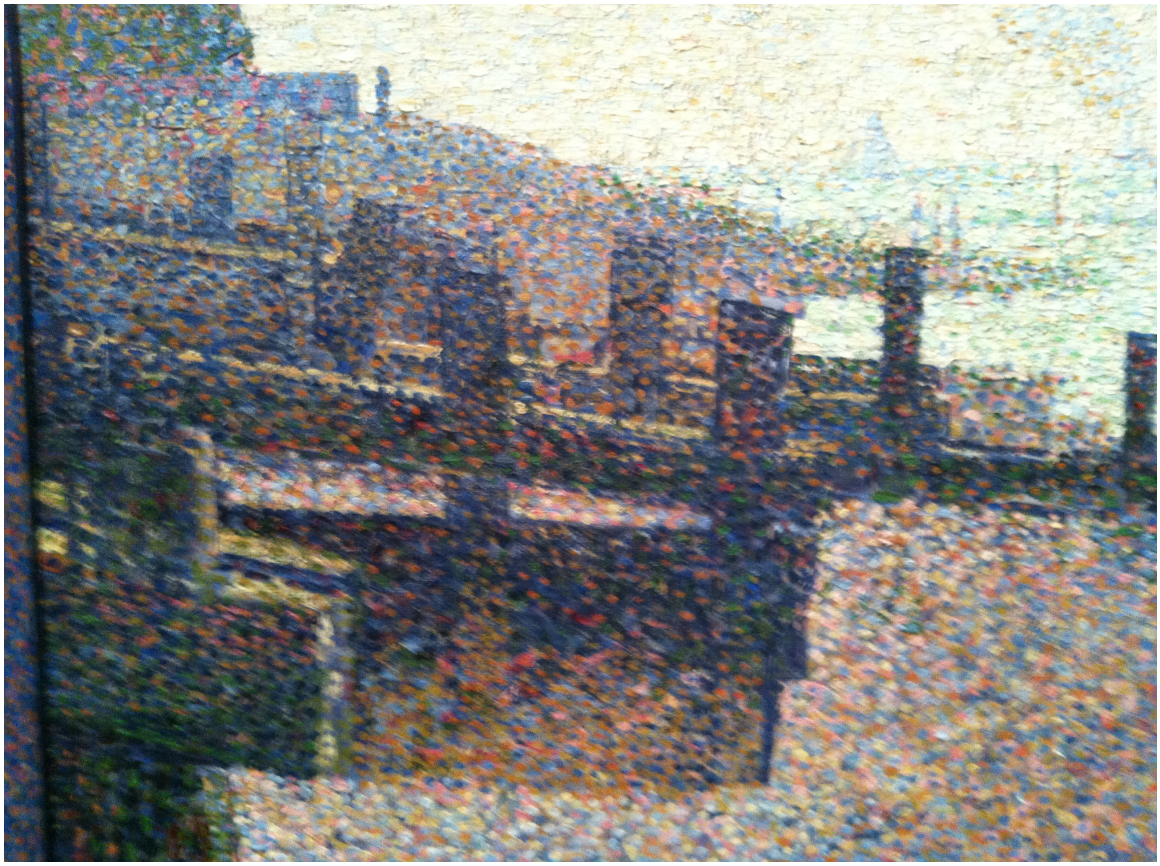

Figure 54 Georges Seurat, detail *L'hospice et le phare de Honfleur*, 1888

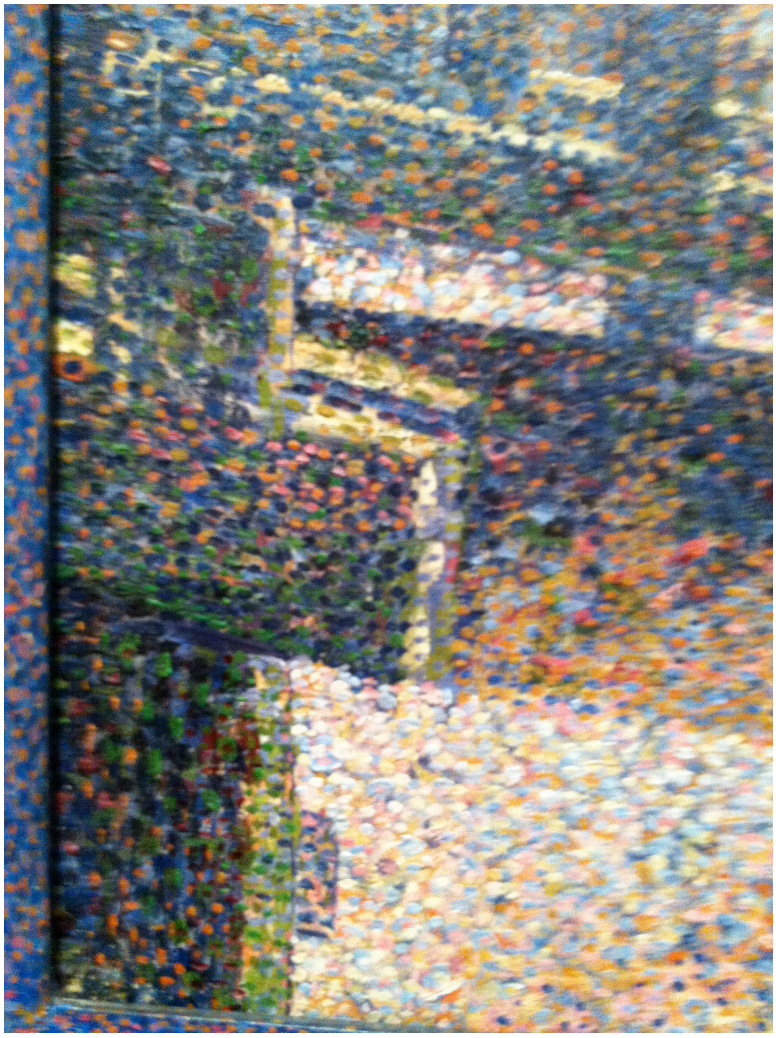

Figure 55 Georges Seurat, detail *L'hospice et le phare de Honfleur*, 1888

Figure 56 Georges Seurat, *Temps gris à la Grande Jatte*, 1886-1887

Figure 57 Georges Seurat, detail *Temps gris à la Grande Jatte*, 1886-1887

Figure 58 Georges Seurat, detail *Temps gris à la Grande Jatte*, 1886-1887

Figure 59 Georges Seurat, detail *Parade de cirque*, 1887-1888

Figure 60 Georges Seurat, *Scène de theâtre*, 1887-88

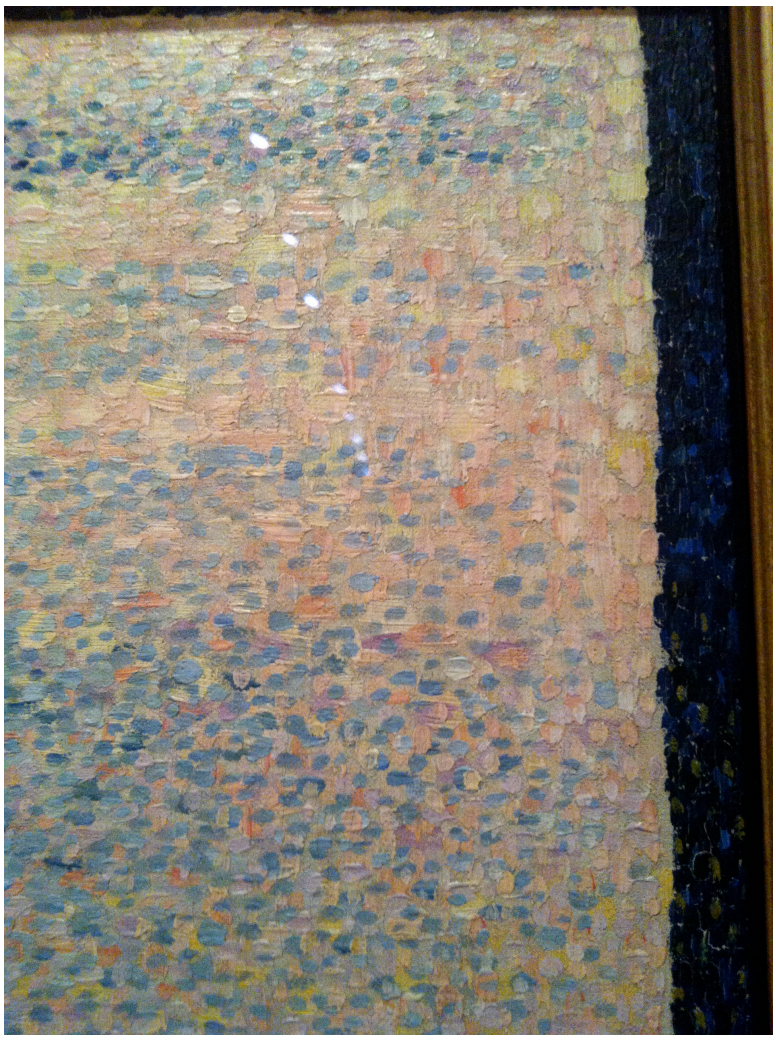

Figure 61 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

Figure 62 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

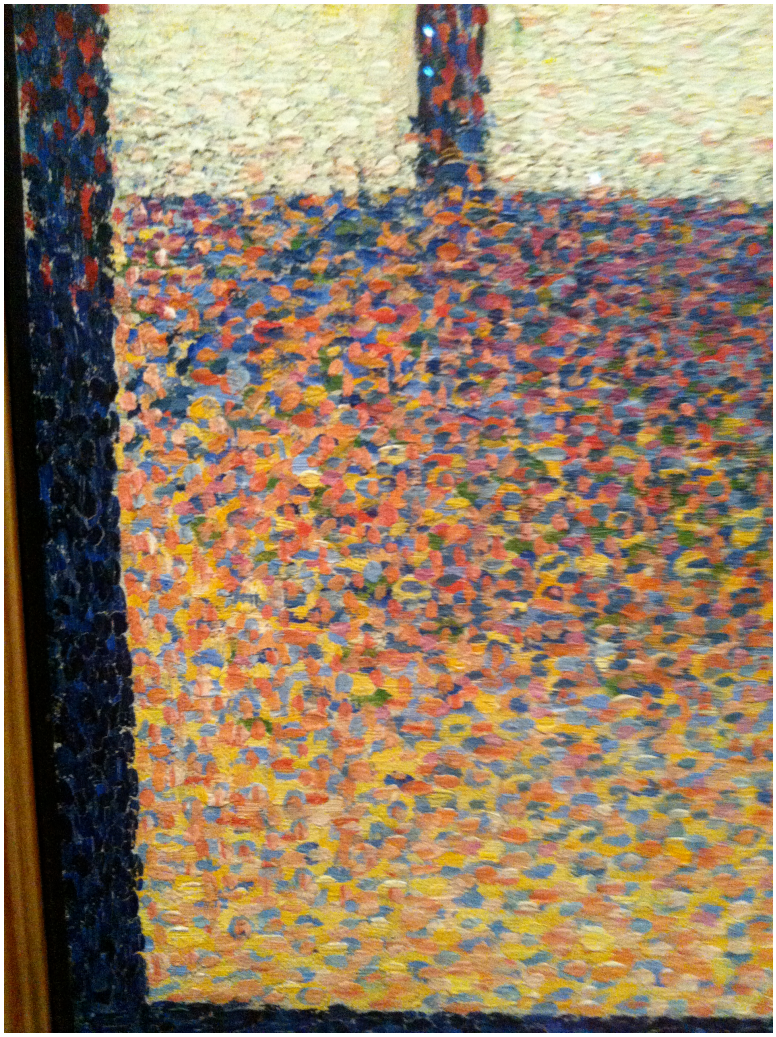

Figure 63 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir, 1890*

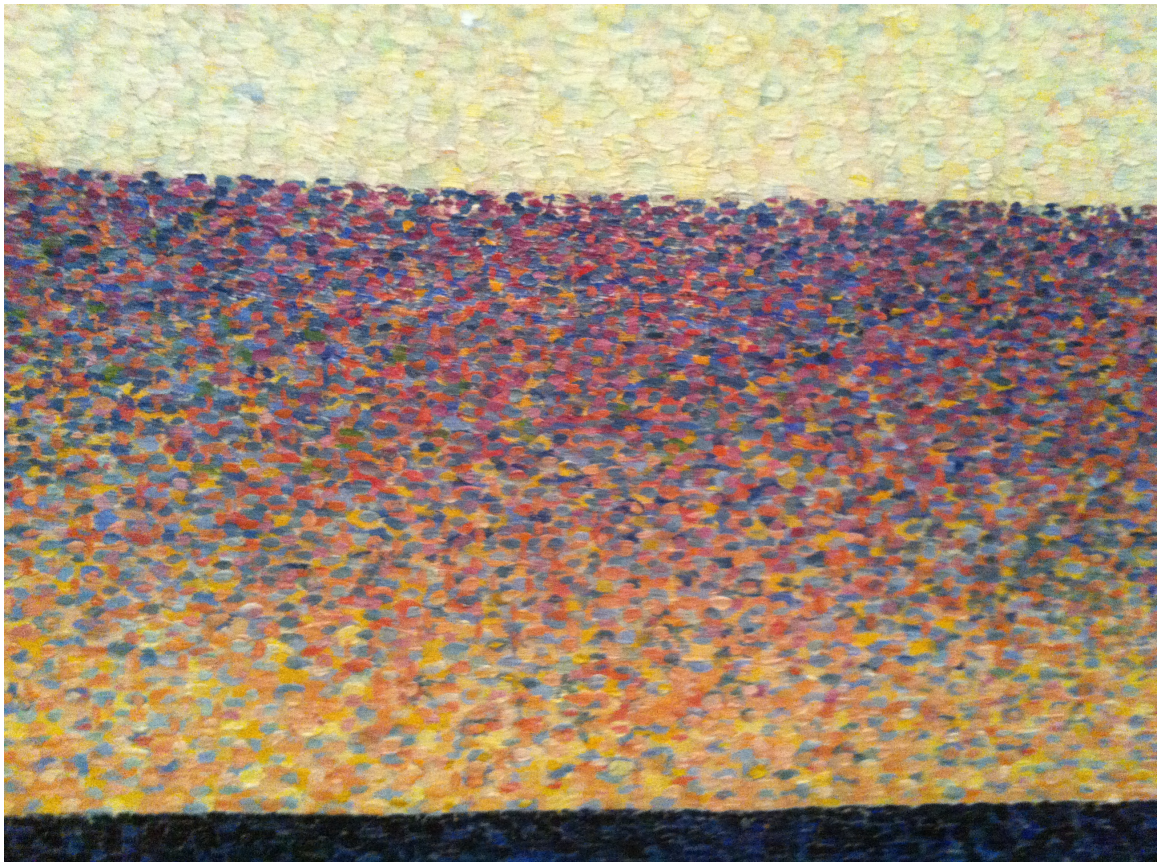

Figure 64 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chenal de Gravelines: un soir, 1890*

Figure 65 Georges Seurat, detail of study for *La Grande Jatte*, 1884

Figure 66 Georges Seurat, detail of study for *La Grande Jatte*, 1884

Figure 67 Georges Seurat, study for *Cirque*, 1890-91

Figure 68 Georges Seurat, detail of study for *Cirque*, 1891

Figure 69 Georges Seurat, *Le petit paysan en bleu*, 1881-82

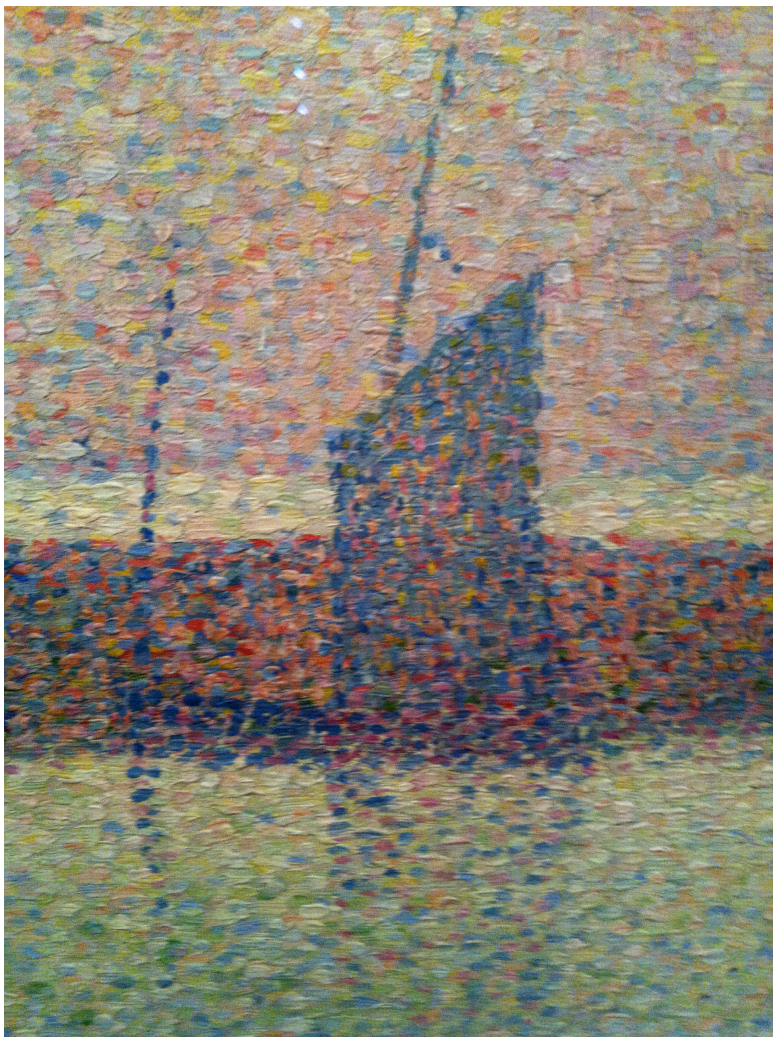

Figure 70 Georges Seurat, detail *Le Chanel de Gravelines: un soir*, 1890

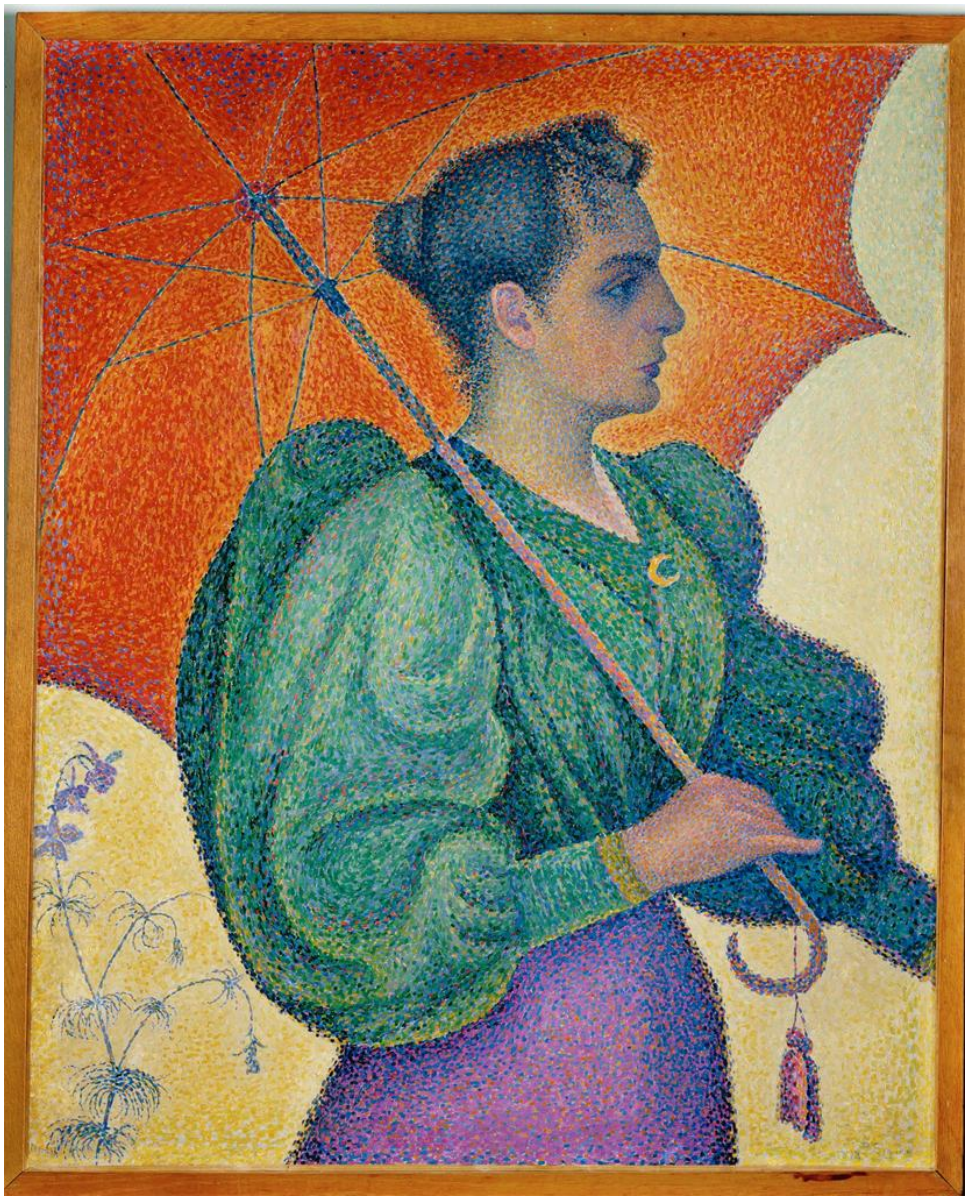

Figure 71 Paul Signac, *Woman with Umbrella*, 1893

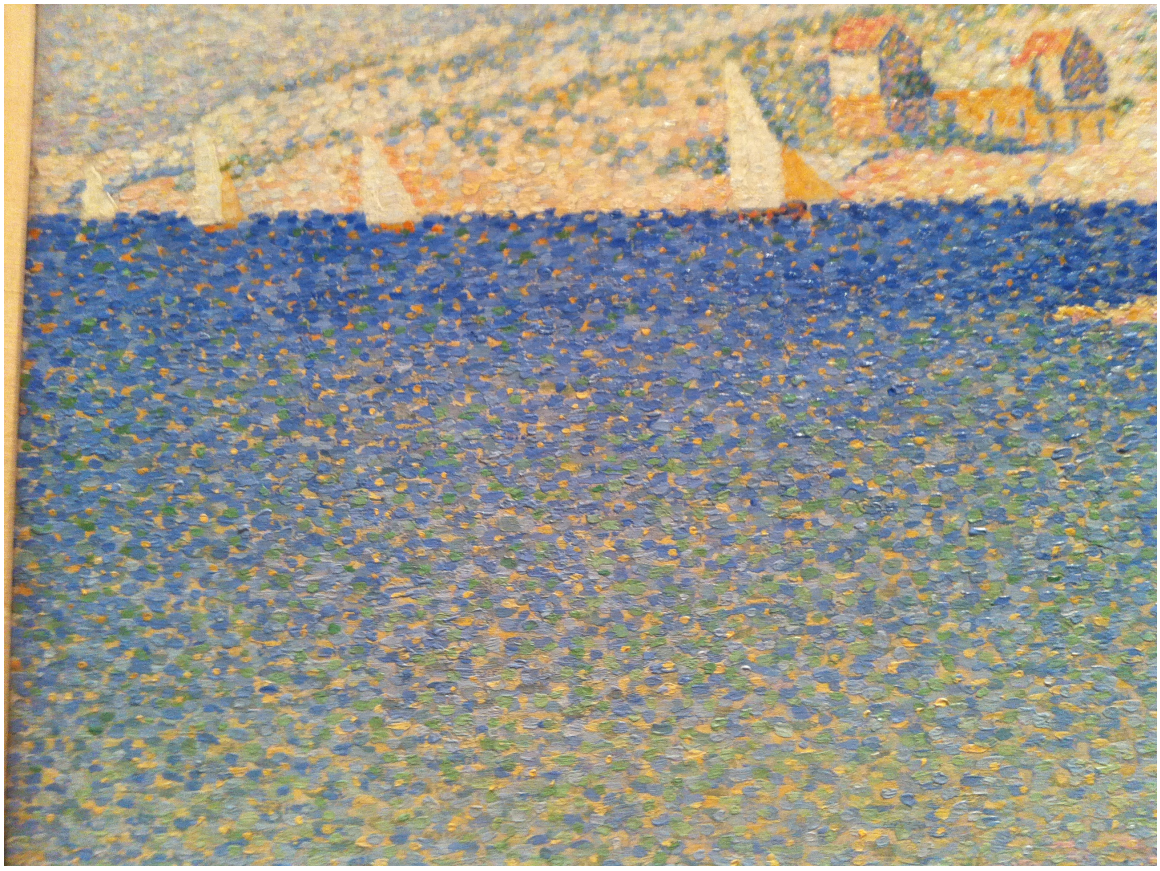

Figure 72 Paul Signac, *The Jetty at Cassis*, 1889

Figure 73 Paul Signac, detail of *Notre Dame de la Garde Marseilles*, 1905-06

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